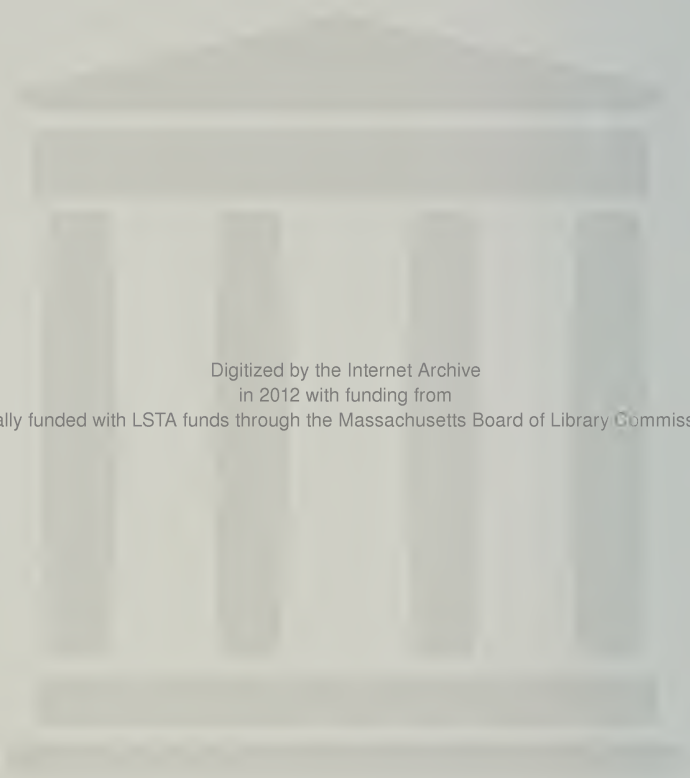


i magazine

a Literary Arts Journal



Spring 2007



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i magazine

a literary arts journal
spring 2007

i magazine
is a student publication of
Mount Wachusett Community College
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i magazine

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GUEST POET: MARIANNE STOY

Marianne is a staff member in Health Services at
Mount Wachusett Community College.

This poem was written while in Africa climbing Kilimanjaro.
She dedicates it to the "Kili Chicks."

LISTEN TO THE COLORS OF AFRICA

In the distance
Kilimanjaro emerges
Sacred to tribes below.

Over the brush
Giraffe's peer
Anticipating change.

Singing chants
Messiah men and women
Welcome weary guest.

Huddled in trees
Mischievous monkeys lurk
Eager to snatch a feast.

Beside the road
A toddler stands
No mother to be seen.

Scattered in fields
Herds of goats
Grazing on parched grass.

To the stream
Ginger women stroll
Laundry on their heads.

Toward the water hole
Elephants march
Forage for a drink.

Through the field
Young warriors run
Spears clutched in hand.

Beneath a tree
Clamoring lions rest
Eluding mid-day heat.

On the horizon
Thunderheads loom
Threatening torrent rains.

Seasons veer
Relief in grasp
Serengeti restored – new life.

Close your eyes
You may hear
The Colors of Africa.

WERE THE WORDS OF APPRECIATION

Colin Progen

If I write, "I'm sorry" a thousand times onto a piece of paper,
would it be enough?

What if I folded that same piece of paper into a paper airplane and
threw it with as much force as I could create?

Would it get to you from where I am?

With the rain, I believe it would become soggy, and sag solemnly
before ever reaching your hands.

So no... you'd never get it.

It's so easy to push that little red button that says eject. You know
you shouldn't, but there's the voice of grudge drilling through your
brick walls saying,

"Do it.

Just do it."

Why don't you,

just

press it

and watch me fly as I'm expelled into the air.

Alright,

I'm going to sit here and wait then.

Let me unfold this paper airplane, flip it over and slam it down on
the table.

Will you forgive me if I write,

"I love you" a thousand times onto this piece of paper?

Watch me plunge my quill into

Ashby gray skies that collide with the Rindge border of New
Hampshire; they loiter.

Junction after junction after highway after back road, I drove with
you on my mind.

I stopped at the 'venient and bought a pack of reds before I sped
off onto the country highway. I smoked half and then some, and
realized I'm so keen on your love.

My ears pop from gliding as high as a kite would along this route.
But the wind shifts and hitting a rock near the bottom is not a comfortable silence.

But who knew; anyone but you?

I'm coming up on the silo on the left, and the Vermont Mountains on my right.

A few more wrong turns lead me to pudgy tree huggin' hippies that set up shop on the highways.

This ain't Marco Polo's quest, I'm on my own journey from schools that are old and

tired of teaching the quaintness of a Southern Royalton to the cleansed flood of Lupa's pristine bath water.

I stand at the foot of the flood – the water divides into two rivers that merge together around my feet into a grey funnel.

One, two, three strikes,
and I'm out.

I'm thrown into the white river that rushed for miles attracting me to the heart, deep beneath the rushing waves and then placed a soft pillow over my mouth and nose,
and I gasp.

Then I walk the rest of the way into the sacred village.

I won't look down. I won't look back.

One foot in front of the other, these shoes have cruised countless grounds.

I stop – collect my dreams.

You make me laugh that nervous laugh that I can't control but I will not fall easily this time. I've been told that when both my feet are planted firmly on the ground, nothing can ever shake me.

I'll pace myself this time, stand still and balance a marionette of you in one hand and a figurine of my father in the other.

Army men of my friendly connections will try to teeter and tip me by marching across my shoulders and kicking their cleats into my neck.

But I will be planted firmly on the ground, so nothing will shake me.

Near the opening of the woods I'll stand and listen to the vicious pack.

Moaning footsteps, fierce howls and screams echo off the trees, and up to the house. This house is a home.

I can hear as they move through the thick woods on perhaps a trail
I walked when today first began. When my voice was the only
sound heard yelling

I WANT YOU,

as I kicked dirt up into the air. That's when I noticed the feather. I
plucked it from the Earth and stuck within the knot of a tight
bandana round my head.

Hours later now, groups of strong boney legs kick dirt up into the
air, and groups of clumsy legs trip and stumble over roots. I hear
each sleek, uncomfortable strand of their hair slice the air as the
pack moves forward.

The howls yell

I WANT YOU

into the air and the coyote's words struck me like knives, but all I
can think of is you.

The wails and shrieks are so shrill that baby blue blue blue jay eggs
crack open and hatch and the orange lilies turn to face the other
way, but all I can think of is you.

I stand in amazement as the sound carries to my ears. Hugs me,
and swiftly heaves me up to the blue blue blue sky and back to the
house where safety lurks in each corner, hall, closet, and book case
- and inside a book on a case that covers a wall were the words of
appreciation...

"I will be your strongest adversary and your biggest admirer."

Pressed deep into the crease, tucked between a poetic prayer and
the story of a new life

as it takes a first deep breath, scrolled on pages twelve and
thirteen was the note.

Simple black ink with lots of extra lines; letters as tall as trees they
spoke to me.

I'll be the wind in your hair as you enter the world, through the
back door out to the back deck.

Then off the deck through flowers
over the fence

through the yard and garden
beyond the trees

above the tree tops and mountains

and up into the clouds and that blue blue blue sky.

Bells chime near by and a branch bounces in the clean air - and I
can breath again as a bird takes flight to travel far away into the
blue blue blue sky, and all I can think of it you.
I need you to stay solid in these clouds.

SUNLIGHT AND SHADE

Alyssa Kvenvold

The rooster boasts by tossing back his head,
He crows about the hours of the days,
And never once considers if he's dead,
The sun shall sail the welkin anyway.
The moon is shier but she cannot glow
Without the brilliance of that rival sphere,
The sun. And though she shimmers on the snow,
Her luster cannot be so bright and clear.
The tiny orchid hides in forest deep,
Away from too much light, the glaring sky,
Will burn its blushing buds if sun should creep
Too close, and yet in shade it shall not die.
Some make themselves bold, some feed off of might,
But sometimes the subtle shine more than the bright.



Allyssa Kenvold

RETURN

Alyssa Kvenvold

A deer trail churns through
Late winter snow, a torn and
Rambling path, a straight one though,
Coursing quiet through the forest,
A small rivulet of deer had passed
Through here in morning twilight,
Down by the stream they massed,
To stop and have a drink, whilst
Large ears flicked and roved and scanned,
The blue forest that surrounded them,
Deer rested there, the while they could,
I read their sharp tracks in the snow,
And wonder where the deer will go,
I pause a while... but I move on.

The sticky snow is still too deep
To truly please the part of me
That winter's arms had sent to sleep
When autumn's fire was creeping crisp
Across the land, the evening of the year,
When the sun was growing red and dark
And setting like a distant fire dying
In the west behind the blackened trees,
But I have wakened now, and it's
Too late for me to slumber or to sleep by
Mounds of snow whose brilliant white
Is melting into dirty slush and sagging
Where the mice made hidden trails,
I pause a while... but I move on.

There is a redness in the trees

Where the barren branches start to
Bloom, and may the color ease
The selfsame tedium of mortem browns
And dry pine greens which greets me now
Upon my return to this, the living world,
And weaving through the trees I marvel how
The sun is so much warmer now than
When last we met before the air had
Sunken cool and indigo, and all the land
And I had coiled up to hibernate away
The briefest days and longest nights,
And now today along my tramping trail
I pause a while... but I move on.

The high blue sky is clotted thick
With cream of clouds and sweetening songs,
Of birds who've spent the bitter winter,
Here, the birds who battled through
The snowy nights when wind bit deep and,
Ice cut close, and feathers could not
Save the ones who are not here today
To sing the vernal praises of the
Land of past and present and the bird
Gods, and the life they live, but still,
The ones who have survived are singing
Clear, and winging fleet against the
Endless vault above, where come caress
Of summertime I too will ride, wind willing.
But for today, I greet today,

And pause a while... but I move on.

A WELL-LEARNED LESSON

Tara O'Brien

"Tamen! Tamen get up, I know you can hear me!"

Tamen groaned at the sound of his mother's broom thudding against the ceiling bellow. "I'm up, I'm up, *shesh!*"

The creak of Tamen's tired bed was drowned out only by the snapping sound of his back as he got up. The sun was already flooding into his shabby looking room from the lone window, as Tamen dressed into a patched up pair of trousers and a tattered dark green tunic. He was a lengthy sixteen year old with long spindly arms and stork like legs. They were the tell tail signs of a sudden growth spurt. At the mirror he made no attempt to tame his wild dirty blonde hair and simply slumped down the stairs in an undead-like state. Once down stairs he was greeted by the menacing figure of his mother, who stood tapping her foot and scowling ominously.

"Hey Mum...what's for breakfast?" He moaned groggily.

"You missed it." She replied shortly. "It's almost noon."

"Okay...so then how about lunch?" This was a mistake. His eyes grew wide as his mother's face turned a brilliant shade of crimson. She marched over to the door and picked up his boots. She then pulled the wooden door open with such force that it was nearly wrenched off its rusty hinges.

"I have had enough Tamen! Your father and brother have been working all day and all you've been doing is sleeping! You are the laziest boy I have ever seen! Now you get out there and get yourself a trade or they'll be no meal at all for you today!"

"But mum..." The look on his mother's face ended all arguments, so with mumbled complaints he took his boots and left.

There was hardly a cloud in the sky as Tamen walked down the dusty wagon road toward town. The beautiful day and the joyful songs of sparrows in the surrounding maple trees would normally have put anybody in a good mood.

"What's the point of having a trade?" He complained as he kicked a rock down the path. "You do tons of back breaking work for just a little pay. There's no sense in it!" Tamen sighed and noticed an old stone well along the side of the road. The rickety sign beside it read, "Wishing Well". He walked over to the well and sat gloomily down on its rim.

Tamen cringed as his stomach roared like a form of gurgling thunder. "Honestly there's got to be an easier way to make money." Then the idea came to him.

A tattered rope still extended down from the crank and into the well's black depths, meaning that a bucket might still be attached.

"If a bucket is still down there, then maybe some of the coins people threw down there..." Tamen jumped up and excitedly began to turn the crank. It squeaked and groaned as the heavy bucket emerged from the dark abyss. When Tamen finally saw what was inside his face glowed. It was apparent that the people of this town had very good aim as the bucket was almost filled to the brim with shinning gold coins. Tamen quickly wound the bucket up the rest of the way and pulled it up on to the well's rim.

"Well that was a lot easier!" Tamen beamed as he began to pocket the bucket's valuable contents.

Suddenly a deep voice sounded from the right, "What are you doing boy?"

Tamen jumped and looked around for the source. The area was completely deserted, the only noise coming from the chirping sparrows near by.

"I'm down here kid." Tamen's face paled as he slowly looked down. Sitting on the well beside him was a plump bull frog, who was gazing up at him with large skeptical eyes. "You do realize this is a wishing well?"

Tamen leapt with fright and released his grip on the bucket, allowing it to slip back down into the well's abyss. "You can talk!" he exclaimed.

"Well it would be kind of hard for me to guard this well if I couldn't, now wouldn't it."

Nothing the frog said seemed to make the situation any better. "Guard? Why does a talking bull frog need to guard a run down old well like this?"

"Because this is a wishing well, as the sign clearly states."

"I can read the sign!" retorted Tamen haughtily.

The frog shook his head and pointed his webbed foot at Tamen's pockets. "Listen those coins that you're stealing are actually wishes, and those are what I'm guarding."

Tamen raised his eyebrow and crossed his arms, "*Right*...so not only do you talk, but you talk of nonsense too."

"Hold one of them up to your ear then if you don't believe me."

Tamen cast the frog a hesitant glance, but did as he said and put one of the coins from his pocket up to his ear. He then heard the voice of a young boy echoing magically from the coin, "I wish for a puppy." Tamen's mouth dropped.

The frog cleared his throat and continued, "So anyways my name is Boto, and since you've stolen wishes from this well, I'm afraid I've had to put a curse upon you."

"What!" said Tamen, after once again regaining his senses. "When did you get around to doing that?"

"While you were stuffing your greedy little pockets with those wishes of course! You must now grant every wish you have taken...that is within human capabilities of course."

A nervous twang rang through Tamen's body as he thought of how many coins he had managed to grab. He had to think of some way out of this, but he had very little experience with being cursed, let alone with talking frogs, so he worked with the first thing that came to mind. "That's ridiculous, why should I even listen to you? You're just a frog." It was fairly juvenile, but perhaps it would up route some sort of loop hole in the frog's plan.

This was apparently not the correct approach, because a sly and unnerving grin quickly came to the Boto's face. "I suppose you don't have to, but that won't change the fact that you're cursed. I've made it so that you can never get rid of those coins. Try to dispose of them and they'll only appear right back in your pockets, try to spend them and they'll melt in the vender's hands and appear in your pockets once more."

"So what you're saying is that the only way for me to get rid of these things is to answer all of their wishes!"

"That's about the size of it...Oh and I also added a bad luck charm that will speed you along. The longer it takes you the more bad luck you will have."

"Well gee thanks." answered Tamen, at which point he stepped back into a patch of poison ivy.

Boto gazed pityingly at him as Tamen realized his misfortune and began to condemn the treacherous little green plants.

After his outburst Tamen gathered himself and turned sadly toward Boto in utter defeat. "Fine. Let's get this over with."

Boto croaked contentedly and with an immense leap, landed on Tamen's shoulder. "Alright then and because I'm such a nice frog I'll give a little help...so now let's see...Oh yes you've got a puppy to find."

That morning proved to be the longest morning Tamen had ever endured. People in the village really wished for the most unusual stuff. For example one poor farmer wished for his chicken coop to be repaired. After hitting his thumb for the twelfth time Tamen commented, "I don't understand! Why can't he just build this himself?"

To which Boto replied, "Why didn't you just find a trade?"

Later, Tamen learned that the farmer he had secretly been helping was an old man who had injured his back. His chickens were getting sick and he had no one who could help him. Tamen hadn't known this at the time.

The day just seemed to drag on endlessly. One particularly tough wish was posed by a young maiden. "I wish that my love Hector will come to see me again."

"How am I supposed to answer that one!" complained Tamen "If I knew anything about love I would have a sweetheart by now! Besides maybe this Hector guy doesn't want to see her again."

"Hector is a good man, but unfortunately he has an awful sense of direction. I understand he's quite a fan of the hunt."

Boto's cryptic and unusual clues proved surprisingly helpful, for it appeared that Hector had recently gotten lost on one of his many hunting trips. Finding him had seemed hopeless until Tamen thought of something drastic. It included him dragging an old fox pelt through the forest and straight to the maiden's house. He had to run quickly, less Hector and his pursuing hounds caught him. In the end, the plan worked and the two lovers were joyfully

reunited. Tamen didn't see much of it though, as he collapsed into and exhausted heap onto the ground once he arrived.

Poor Tamen was at his wits end. The sun had almost completely fallen behind the hills and he still had a pocket filled with more wishes.

"*Ugh*, why did I have to take so many? I'll be doing this for days!" he sighed.

Boto hopped down and reached into Tamen's pocket. He pulled out a coin and held it up toward him. "Well, you best keep going then. Here take this one."

"But it's getting late!"

"All the better." He persisted and Tamen tiredly took the coin from the frog's webbed hand. He held it up to his ear and had to listen hard, as the little girl's voice was very quiet.

"I wish I could find some Mountain Stars for my Mom."

Tamen scratched his head. "Mountain Stars...hmm...wait those are those little white flowers that grow on the tops of mountains, right?"

"None other." replied Boto.

"That figures." groaned Tamen, "Can't we just pick some other flowers to give to her Mom?"

"The wish clearly asked for Mountains Stars Tamen. You know the rules..."

Weary from his exhausting day, Tamen began his long hike up the slopes of Mt. Wind Swept nevertheless. It was the only place where Mountain Stars could be found for miles and the climb was hard. The Mountain had received its name due to its barren landscape and gusty winds. The tree line was low, so most of it was covered in dry low growing grasses and shrubs. There were many wildflowers that grew here, but they weren't the ones he wanted. To get to the ones he needed he would have to climb to the top, to the point where boulders breached through the ground and made the slopes steep and hard. The flowers were growing some where between the cracks in these rocks and to make this task even more difficult it was already night.

"Boto, I'm exhausted. How am I supposed to find some little flowers when it's this dark out? I mean the full moon helps, but..."

Boto leapt down off Tamen's shoulder and began investigating the cracks. "This task would actually be much harder if we were doing this during the day."

As Tamen stopped to watch him for a moment he couldn't help, but wonder how this amphibian had managed to keep himself moist all day. This bull frog was certainly something else, but what? He shook his head and returned to the task at hand.

"So tell me, why exactly is this task easier now?"

"Because..." answered Boto as he stopped some distance away, "Mountain Stars only bloom at night. Come see for yourself."

Tamen stumbled over and looked into the fracture between two slate grey rocks. Inside was a cluster of small white flowers. They had four petals that were shaped like stars and in the moonlight they actually seemed to glow. It was amazing that something so miniscule and simple could be so beautiful. When Tamen looked around he could see more of these flowers blossoming near by. It looked like the Milky Way was twisting through the rocks.

"Pick just a few and set them in the small flask of water I told you to bring," ordered Boto. Tamen did as he said and together, they started back down.

At the tree line Tamen was finally able to get some rest and in the morning Boto helped him find the girl. The child was sitting alone on the rim of the fountain at the center of town. She wore plain looking clothes and her hair was tied into two loose braids. When Tamen approached her she looked up at him uncertainly.

"You were looking for some flowers right?" Tamen reached into his pouch and removed the flowers, which were still looking fresh, and held them out to her. "These are the ones right?"

The girl's dark eyes lit up. "Mountain Stars! How did you know?"

"Let's just say a little froggy told me." He shrugged with a slight glance toward Boto who was also hiding in his pouch. "Now I've got to get going."

The girl caught a hold of Tamen's sleeve as he turned around and looked up at him with large pleading eyes. "Will you come with me?"

Tamen was surprised, but unable to say no, he followed the girl through town.

She walked steadily and never slowed at any house they passed. Tamen became really puzzled though when she passed through the gates of the village cemetery.

"My Mom is here." She informed him and she continued silently down the rows almost instinctively. Tamen swallowed in expectation as the situation became clear.

The girl knelt before a slate gray headstone and placed the flowers down before it. "Look Mom your favorites! I was wishing so hard that I could give some to you, and see, it came true." She announced with a genuine smile. "This nice stranger got some for me."

Tamen stared somberly at the scene before him. "Uh...it was no trouble."

The girl beamed and looked up at him. "I can't thank you enough mister, I think Mom really likes them!"

"I'm glad."

Tamen turned and left the cemetery, leaving the girl to be alone with her mother. His emotions seemed to be swirling through him like a churning river. Boto climbed out of the pouch and back onto Tamen's shoulder.

"That was a task well done."

"Yah...but that kid made it out to be some kind of miracle." He sighed. "It was just me climbing up a mountain to get 'um."

"It was to her Tamen. You don't have to have glowing lights and fairy dust for something to be a miracle..."

"Sometimes it just takes a little effort."

Boto grinned with satisfaction. "Sounds like you've gotten the idea Tamen. You don't have to answer anymore wishes."

"Wait." Tamen moved a particularly dingy coin away from his ear with a distant look in his eyes. "There's just one more wish I want to grant."

Tamen's mother was busy in the kitchen cutting vegetables for dinner, tendrils of hair slipping from her bun and into her face as she worked. Her heart leapt as she heard Tamen enter.

"Tamen, my son, where have you been? You had me worried!"

"Sorry." he sighed. "I didn't find a trade."

"Oh?"

"But I'm going to start searching again tomorrow. After all I've got a wish to grant."

"What wish?" she asked curiously.

"It's mine actually." he answered simply. "It's to grant your wish and grow up into someone strong, who can make you proud."

A smile swept across his mother's face as she hugged her son. From the windowsill outside, Boto croaked deeply and bowed his green head. "It looks as though that one leap, will take him quite a ways. In fact...I'll bet he'll never have to land again."

LOVE DOESN'T FIT HERE ANYMORE

Liz Heath

Love doesn't fit here anymore
Love makes fools of
spilled over
 glasses of wine.
Love makes
 waves over capsized boats
make a fool of my
 chardonnay covered
floor
make waves
 on my over-turned
canoe
Love doesn't fit
 here
 anymore
 Velour jacket
split seam at the
 elbow
popped out button
 hands too far away
from the
 cuff
reach s l o w l y for
cups of coffee
on mind
 wandering
table

pop rip
another button gone
another seam gone

another jacket
two shades too

small

Love doesn't fit here
anymore
too tall for the elevator
too

short
for this r d
i e
owl out of habitat

SUPERMAN

looking s o f t and q u i t e

at a coral bowl of KRYPYONITE and
soy milk

born again virgin at sexaholics anonymous

break

me

of

my

bad

habits

Love
doesn't
fit
here anymore
it's stupid o

c l

o c

k

closing time

last c a l l

too

too

too

petals

faded and

late for corny poems

late for midnight phone calls

late for lovey-dovey rose

f
 a
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 l
 on my chardonnay floor
 whispering secrets of
 poetry and BURSTS
 of delicately m n c
 a i
 spider webs too BIG for the
 cor
 n
 e
 r
 now
 rippled in red and the sweet
 smell
 of dead grapes
 Love doesn't
 fit here anymore

THE GENOCIDE OF SELF EXPRESSION OF AN ART FORM: A TRUE STORY

Liz Heath

When I was in the 7th grade
I started writing poetry
When I was in the 7th grade
they sent me to a shrink
(can you see where this is going?)
When I was in the 7th grade
they sent me to a shrink for writing poetry
Let me set the scene
Mrs. Cochran's English class
We got an assignment to write 5 poems
1) write your name in a vertical line and write one sentence about
yourself for every letter
my name is Elizabeth
 E – everyone thinks I'm weird
 L – Life is weird
 I – I *am* weird
 Z – ...Zebras are weird...I don't know, nothing poetic starts
 with a "z"
2) write a poem about the given subject, which I now can't recall
3, 4, and 5) write about anything you want
For 7th graders, this is a dangerous subject
I first wrote about the emptiness of feeling alone
In a school where everyone makes fun of me
I then wrote about the destruction of a society
that had succumb to injustice, social inequality, commercialism
and crime
at the hands of an idiotic dictator
(oh, look, I could tell the future)
Lastly I wrote about suicide, plain and simple
When I was in the 7th grade

they sent me to a shrink for writing poetry

Oddly enough, it wasn't the poem about
Suicide that caused the concern
Or the poem about the destruction of unequal society
The poem that made them think I was depressed
was the one about feeling alone because everyone made fun of me

So I sat in the waiting room and sighed long and loud
In an attempt to make everyone else uncomfortable
It didn't work

"Mom, I don't want to be here"

"I know, I don't want you to be here either, but the school says you
have to be"

"Mom, when I get in there, I'm not going to say anything"

"If that's what you want, go right ahead"

It was at that moment that I realized my mom was the greatest
hero I could ever ask for

My name was called
and the girl "helping" me looked like my sister, who is a mere 3
years older than me

We sat in silence for a few minutes
and finally the words just spilled out of me – and I quote
"Why the fuck am I here?"

She was informed that I was depressed, angry, a loner,
suicidal, and possibly a non-conformist

I told her I *was* depressed, angry, a loner,
suicidal, and a confirmed non-conformist
Although saying that made it null and void

See, confirming I was a non-conformist confirmed I was
conforming to non-conformity

.....she didn't get it
and sitting in her office chatting about music, movies and the
American way of bull-shit

she came to the topic I was dreading
The poems

I wrote what I felt

That's what poems are, feelings

So I wrote what I felt

What's the big deal?

After another hour of battling about my poems
and my twisted way of thinking, she made her decision
Diagnosis: Normal 7th grader

.....

what?

Saying I was “normal” was a worse insult than calling me “crazy”

In the 7th grade, they sent me to a shrink

For no apparent reason

MY LUCRETIA

AnnMarie Ferguson

You and I, two sylvan nymphs
Clothed in nothing but our unbridled passions.
Bodies gyrating in a pagan dance
Voices rising like the Sirens of so long ago.
Singing to Cybele, our mother Goddess.
Frenzied with desire for only each other
Sweet laughter escaping my lips
Watching your flaming ringlets
Dancing around your waist.
Eyes in the forest watching intently
As you pull me closer
Lips like a primrose
The emeralds beneath your seductive lashes
Shining brighter than Eos
For even She is jealous of your shining beauty
The world is ours alone
Under the crescent moon.

I WANT TO BE YOUR CYBER-FANTASY

AnnMarie Ferguson

So many freakish beauties...
We all stare, but you have them all stored away.
I want them as much as you.
But even more, I want to BE them,
For others to look at me like that,
TO WANT ME.

If you say others think of me that way, I feel I am being
patronized, chastised...
Throw a bone to the dog, a lolly to the curly-headed child, keep her
quiet, keep her hidden...
For no one wants to listen to the weeping of a morbid angel who
feels so unbeautiful.
I just can't help but wonder what it feels like to have alabaster
skin, a tiny waist, a haunting face.
For others to want a quick glance, though I would never let them
touch.
To be another gorgeous fantasy-Gothic-babe
Stored on your hard drive.

HER SOFTNESS

AnnMarie Ferguson

Darkness falls, blindness waking the senses
Hearts throbbing, an endless circle
Your words whispered softly
My gentle Sapphist
Legs quiver
Bodies shiver
Tears flow
As free as waves in Winter
Vows of forever
Go unheard
By deaf beggars
And we smile in Silence
Knowing that
Sunlight brings
Rainbows
And
Moondust

KISS ME

Tracy A. Ulrich

I kiss his hand sensing
Lust between us Sex
On my mind the warmth
The look
We are alone
In our minds the kiss
The touch of skin
Bodies, our bodies off
Balance do you want to
Kiss me feel the sex
Between us together alone

WISHES

Tracy A. Ulrich

Wish I had more good times to lean on
More memories to remember
More celebrations to daydream
One last talk with mom to cry
Stronger legs to walk
Better ability to love
More faith to care

NEVER UNDERSTOOD

Tracy A. Ulrich

Lying here month after month
One by one everyone leaves me
Alone not able to handle the situation
I hear not understood
Never have but you don't need-
All I want is a friend and lover
In the meantime I'm left alone
Don't know what to say I hear
Nice to have the choice to leave
Leave me behind because I-
I'm here alone to accept and forgive

THIS IS MY DAD

Tracy A. Ulrich

Light bulb burns bright in child's easy bake oven, eyes
Dance delighted amazed tiny cake mixes
Mixed together, frosted neatly by mom's excitement
Waiting for dad—triple decker delight tonight. Child knew
You worked hard, loving smile that brought you home
Cuddling
In arms after night out dancing pretending to sleep
contented
In your arms, six/seven dropped screaming blocks away
You came running remember
Pool water freezing tiny body held
Under fixing hole in pool liner laughing
Soon dreaded, our visits to
Frye and Smith, loving co-workers game
Of cat and dog
Billiards and football, happiest
With you dancing disco routine at someone's wedding
Moment of pride to be daughter who loves
Dad remembering
Marriage day, you nervous still held
Me tight not to fall feeling proud of Pa
And Ma dancing like floating
Angels
Settled into trade, worked hard and proud
Hoping you're yelling out loud
"That's my daughter"
Admire adore, not thirty-nine
Anymore, respected handsome silver
Patriarch fox in light gray suit. Love
In abundance all around pride proud
Yelling aloud
"This is my dad"

SPIRITS WALK

Alyssa Kvenvold

"Beans, beans, they're good for your heart. The more you eat 'em the more you fart. The more you fart the better you feel, so eat your beans at every meal. And it's true too. How's that for sagacity?"

A child and young man were walking down the city street. The younger was skipping ahead, while the elder dawdled farther behind as he watched the trickle of people streaming by. His skin was a cool clay brown, and he was tall, certainly taller than the boy who was straining to see into the big metal trashcan he had paused next to.

"Terrible. Childish. That wasn't wise at all. Maybe wise-ass. Maybe not even that." The young man wrinkled his nose. "What now? Did you find an old hamburger to eat?"

"No. Gross! I just wanted to see. And you can't just ask a person to say something wise. It doesn't work that way. Wisdom... it's just got to come. Like a flash flood. Like a bug in your eye. Zam! One second it's all clear and then it's just there and you crash your bike because you got blinded by it. Just crash it right into the tree of wisdom." The boy stood up on his tippy-toes to peer inside the garbage can. "Hey, did you know there's a war going on?"

The elder of the pair gazed down at the headlines in the tossed paper that lay on top of a mound of fly housing and refuse. He sighed. "Who doesn't? Honestly. You'd think you'd know these things. Even I know them."

"Tadeo, you know I was in Mongolia. I can't keep up on everything." The child rolled his eyes dramatically.

Tadeo shrugged. The city was hot and though a breath of a breeze stirred the hazel curls of his hair, it was hardly enough to blow the stifling humidity away. The sun was sinking, and the smog and the summer heat were glowing a distant orange, and

staining the very air a genuine dog-days yellow. "So you really are as dumb as you look."

"Hey. That was a low blow. I don't look dumb. Ever!" The boy, pale-skinned and black-haired, began to skip away, but hadn't moved far when he stopped next to a lamppost, where stood a woman who was talking loudly into her cell phone.

He tapped his chin. "She's had botox."

Tadeo raised his eyebrows. He'd sauntered after. He always did. He always followed along. Just to pretend like he didn't care too much he loitered by a television store before responding. "And I care why?"

"Just saying. She's just going to look older in the end. Shame." He reached up and tapped the bottom of the phone, and suddenly the reception was gone. The woman jerked her head back in surprise.

"Trish? Hello? Can you hear me? Trish? It cut out. Dammit." She snapped the phone shut and walked away with a flounce in her hips.

"But anyway, just because I didn't know about a silly little war doesn't mean I'm a fool."

"Keian, you are a fool. Shakespeare's fool. The one that prances and trounces like a clown, but he's the only one who knows what's going on. The wit. Sharp and dull at once."

"I'm flattered, Tadeo. I really am. Besides, I never knew you read Shakespeare. I never knew you could read!" The young boy giggled.

"But a fool is still fool." Tadeo ignored the jutted out chin and pouty face of his companion and hooked his hands behind his back, thumbs through the bright red fabric of his belt, and continued onwards. Past the drug store, past a mini-mart, past a boarded up house, past the store that sold erotic cakes. Giving them each a glance but never wavering in the detachedness of his gaze.

Finally his friend spoke. "But you have to admit there have been so many wars. It's hard to keep them all straight."

"Not really. I just ignore them. War is just another way of dying."

"So's having your lungs ripped out through your throat by rabid lemurs. But you wouldn't want it to happen to you." Keian crossed his arms triumphantly.

This time he actually elicited a chuckle from the older boy. "Point. Keian, you certainly have a way with words."

The boy snorted. "When you've been around as long as I have been, you pick up that sort of thing."

"I look forward to kicking it before then. How old are you now anyway?"

People were passing by them without a glance or a nod. Hurrying by to their lives and their work, to their televisions and their babies, and their booze. No nod, no greeting. Only a cursory gust of wind as they scuttled by, each with their minds in a different world. But to the companions this was neither odd nor unsettling. No one could see them. Not when they weren't looking at the world anymore. Numbers, and traffic signs, and concrete buildings, and two boys.... All streaming by without any one of those fast-paced city-dwellers really looking t the world anymore. Like the man in the SUV who would be driving by in five minutes and never notice that the road signals had been switched by the city planning board. Until he crashed into the light pole where moments before a middle aged woman was talking to Trish.

Just a minute, a careful minute. That was all it would take for someone to see how the sidewalk was patterned with fifty colors of discarded bubble gum all squished into the cracks. To see the skinny black cat that was watching from the third floor apartment with bright yellow eyes, and blinking when the cars went by. To see the swirly summer heat in the air making liquid curls like it had a million years ago, and like it would even after every city was gone. To see two boys strolling.

"One thousand five-hundred fifty-five. Pretty nifty number. I should get a t-shirt with it on it. Or something."

"Or you could change your phone number to have it at the end."

"No. I can't. I don't have a phone. Besides. It's taken already by some guy named Norman. I called him. He seemed nice enough. So I let him keep it."

"Ha." Tadeo nodded dully. His thumbs unhooked from his belt. "How kind."

"You don't even want to know why I was in Mongolia?"

"Probably to see the Mongols."

"Pish. More than that."

"Are you going to tell me?"

"No. Because I know you don't care."

Tadeo grinned. "Right you are."

"You never care where I've been."

"Only where you're going. Hopefully away."

"Butt face. I saw the Romans too. A za-zillion years ago.

When they were still relevant and more than just another TV show about power and depravity. But you don't care. Even though I listen to your stories about Aztecs. And Spain."

Tadeo scoffed. "That's because you listen to stories from everyone. Even cockroaches."

Keian gave him a playful shove as they passed by a homeless man. The young boy stopped, and broad grin crept over his face. He scurried over to kneel next to the slumped form, all grey and unshaven, tattered and smelling like moldy clothing from the Seventies.

"He can't see you. He's asleep."

Keian shot a glare back at Tadeo. "He can still hear though." He bent in close and whispered, "One-five-five-five."

Tadeo shook his head and laughed. "Why?"

"He'll know what to do with it. It's a good number. It's my number."

As they continued on, past the broken neighborhoods, past the sandlot, past the uptown houses and the Italian restaurant competing for the street with a taco joint, the sun was sinking lower and redder. The light was mirrored on every facet of the city, on the oil stain in the street, the blue windows on the buildings stretching towards the dusken sky, on the eyes of the little girl hand in hand with her grandfather who giggled as two funny boys passed by. Those who could see still, those who could truly see more than their feet or their paperwork in front of them, would feel the sunset in their hearts and pause to take a deep breath of it before it faded into dingy grey. It would leave them feeling a little more swelled on the jaunt home; a little more joyous on their journey. The happiness would be infectious. They would tip their head kindly at the strangers and they would wave to the skinny cat. And tomorrow when they heard on the news that a homeless man had won the lottery with four lucky numbers, they would smile and think, "Well, good for him."

In the summer city the sparrows would chirp and build their messy nests. Signs would change. Little girls would grow.

Bubble gum would brighten up a sidewalk even if it wasn't appreciated. The seagulls would swoop down to eat French fries, and wheel overhead, and cry out plaintively. And if one little boy and his buddy stopped to ask them where they'd been, they'd be happy to share a story or two. The unseeing folk of business and bustle wouldn't pause to ponder why the gulls flocked around nothing sometimes. If they listened they might hear a whisper. Maybe they'd even see in the flight of the birds that death would never be the end of the stroll.

DWEEDLEDEE

Gregory Prendergast

Where you goin'?

What now?

Where are you?

You don't know.

They're watching you!

You know they are.

Let them know...

Right now!

His eyes had pierced my soul in such a fashion that it forced me to cry out, "Damn it!"

Ever since the King had exiled me, my situation had been dire. The audacity of his malice would not do much for his reputation amongst the family. Blood is blood, and no action, no matter how delinquent, requires such a vicious rebuttal.

"Those are vital to your existence! You need them, and I need you to have them! What are you supposed to do now? You'll have to wait 'till the end of the month!" I could still hear the shrewdness in his voice echoing in my head. I had found it hard to concentrate.

The sidewalk had broken bits of glass kissing each crevice. Shades of green and brown cuddled in the street light luster. Beyond where the light reached I knew they had been watching me. I had heard them out there beyond my eye's reach.

Do you hear them?

No!

They're out there.

Stay in the light.

I know.

Where'd you put them?

My intention.

I forget.

Daylight came and I knew I could rest for another morning. At night I believed the King's men watched me to insure no faltering on my part. Who the hell did they think they were? I know they knew who they were, but I felt as though their eyes had no right to watch me.

Who is she?

She's beautiful.

I know she is.

Talk to her.

Is she one of them?

Who cares; with those eyes?

She could be tricking you.

It's true.

With bullion hair of the finest gold, she passed me on the street. A black Pea coat hugged her body. She seemed like one of those girls with an over-controlling lover. The kind of couple you might see walk into the bar. He'd hold the door for her, and she'd walk in slowly, of course he'd be trailing and watching right after her. He'd look around and scan the room for other guys, in case they might look at his trophy, and he'd use that opportunity to show her how much he cared by starting shit with a curious onlooker. They'd sit together and it would be easy to tell that she really wasn't in love; she was just scared of being alone and cold. She seemed like she grew frigid easily. She was running away from the cold, not to his warm embrace, I knew it and she knew it, the only one in the dark was him.

Someone needed to release her from that loveless commitment. Did she even understand the amount of pain she was dealing with? I couldn't go on knowing that someone else was dealing pain equivalent to mine in holiness. I approached her to rectify her situation, but she strayed. She was too deep into the situation to understand my intentions. I did, however, manage to

run her down and help her. I have the scratches on my face to prove it.

It was then that I heard the King's trumpets. They weren't far away.

Are they coming for you?

I don't know.

Get out of here!

Shit.

I ran down the road avoiding horses and local vendors, but my legs grew weak quickly. All the king's horses and all the king's men were on my coat tails, and I had no chance. They wrestled me into the lip of love and made my heart stutter. As they forced me into the carriage I screamed, "I will have your heads! All of your heads!"

Did my threats go unnoticed?

They didn't hear you.

Doobybah.

Sittubee.

CalIfaaaa.

Dweedledee.

Dweedledee.

HELP ME KILL

Gregory Prendergast

Who was the one that drove you home,
Let you act the bitch so you don't moan?
I make it all right.

Where were you going, down to the bar?
You make me slap you so hard to get you into the car.
I make it all right.

Your head was laying up right against the window
The blood from you nose lets me feel like you know
I make it all right.

The way you cross your t's and dot your i's
You're just a little girl trying to sell me lies.
I make it all right.

YOUR LOVE

Gregory Prendergast

Is like a carousel
Surrounded by the notion of
Your presently abundant mood
And my soul's evaporation.

THE PANDACRACY (EPISODES 1 & 2)

Amanda Debrececi

Part 1: Where She Once Flew

Shadow awakened to catch his new roommate in his blurry eyes; she was dressing herself in red. A charcoal colored paw reached out clumsily to retrieve a delicate pair of wire framed glasses from the nightstand. Every morning Shadow feared they would not fit on his broadened feline face, but as always, they did.

This morning Shadow also held a vague fear that the blurry red was Butterfly's blood, but it turned out to be a long petticoat and formal hat.

"Where are you going?" The black cat mumbled, adjusting his eyes. He watched Butterfly pat down her large black ears to refit the hat to her own feline features. The room fell quiet save for the lioness shifting the floral headdress over her furry forehead as though placing a crown. Butterfly's heavy tail tuft rose and disappeared behind the coat as she curled her milky off-white tail in towards herself.

In Butterfly's moment of cold shoulder treatment, Shadow let his eyes linger upon her reflection in the full length mirror as he thought back on the first time he met her.

It was in the darkness of Dr. Mundane's laboratory complex as the dull fill of early morning passed weakly through the standardized three inch windows. Shadow was in full garb; to say that he wore the standardized gray pin-stripe suit that allowed him and his comrade – a lion hybrid who went by the name Recon – to fool the cameras. They held the brims of their conforming business casual hats as they passed the cameras in the corridor. They were carefully covering their faces behind the hats, with help from the human hand-shaped gloves they had to force over their stubby paws. This posed a great issue for Recon, as he had far more intrusive claws than Shadow. Shadow remembered one of

Recon's claws having broken through a finger of the left glove and Recon having to hide it in the denseness of his black mane while Shadow silently prayed that the mane would in fact pass for some form of average human hairstyle.

Of course it didn't. The awkward behavior drew the attention of Dr. Mundane's trusted watchman, a man who wore baseball caps and liked to drink beer, an expert on the ways of the mundane. Shadow's heart increased speed by three times as the siren blared. The felines both threw off their hats and gloves to perk their ears and bear their claws.

"They'll have guns." Recon told Shadow. "We've failed. We're out of luck..."

Miles away a tiny Oreo-colored bear plummeted from her perch upon a fluffy captain's chair and fled from the control room, babbling that she would send reinforcements.

Shadow and his comrade stood facing away from one another. They were cornered now, somehow, in a straight hallway. They examined the horde of pin-striped suits that covered over fifty men, all of average height and build, all carrying a style of handgun commonly kept for self defense.

A darkness came upon the room. A third growl overpowered the snarling of the two outnumbered male felines, and from a vent sprang the flashing vision of Butterfly pouncing into the center of the crowd. Recon was found instantly captivated by the furry warrior woman, but Shadow was so disturbed by the proficiency of her killing that he had to cover his eyes. Recon licked some splayed blood from his lips.

Shadow's awareness returned to the quiet of the bedroom. Butterfly paused before the door.

"I have an interview." Butterfly whispered.

"For what?" muttered Shadow. "A job?"

Butterfly nodded.

Shadow reminded her, "You can't get a job."

Butterfly side-glanced Shadow; She was passionless.

"Even if you could you don't need one. Panda will take care of us..." He lowered his ears and pouted.

"In order for Panda to continue, it requires sacrifice."

"What is the point of this, Flutter?"

Butterfly adjusted her top button. "When the accident happened there were hundreds of us, many too ashamed to live as the beasts they had become. And so they took their own lives, many in terrible and embarrassing ways."

"What are you saying?" Shadow didn't get up. He didn't want to seem threatening.

"I chose not to die that way, Shadow. But that does not mean I chose not to die."

Butterfly left quietly.

Shadow stared down at the floor. He whispered, "Why..."

Shadow remembered the time before this, the time when he lived with and cared for Panda.

The little bear slept grumbling upon her plush, downy cushion, swatting at an invisible foe in the air. Her fur was well pressed from at least a half hour of grooming, all of which is completed just before her head servant feeds her a baby bottle of sugary Darjeeling to wake her up for the day. It was a careful process, beginning at about five in the morning.

Shadow opened his rubbery brown eyes and rubbed them vigorously. Sometimes it would look like he was waiting for them to fall out, he would rub so long. But if he didn't reach full capacity first thing in the morning, the shaky balance of victories over the dreaded Dr. Mundane would fall from cooperation.

Capital, the mistress' second servant, was already standing in the doorway.

"Morning Master Shadow." He said in a chipper manner.

Shadow rubbed his eyes a second time, the charcoal colored fur about them whistling off to the sides and out of his way as he slipped on his beady glasses. Capital's figure came into clarity, the big bulky paws of a lion fidgeting beyond the lax, under-managed and lithe leftovers of a human torso and a slinky tail curled around into his gemmed belt buckle. Whenever Shadow woke up to the sight of the belt buckle, he felt a strange, passionate urge to jut out his claws and shred the entire belt into tiny leather shreds. But instead, he did this morning what he did every morning, submit Capital a single word consisting of two syllables.

"Report."

Capital smiled. "All quiet, Master Shadow."

“Stop calling me that.” Shadow replied as he pulled himself up from the cushion and loudly cracked his back. Most would be surprised that the loud cracking didn’t wake up the little black and white bubble of fur that Shadow left behind on the pillow, but Capital had seen Panda’s morning routine too many times to still be surprised that it took a strong dose of sweetened caffeine to get the squeaking, teddy-shaped ball rolling for another day in the throne.

Shadow was a first generation... he was once a human being, as was Panda, original victims of the accident, and somehow, like her, was still alive. Many accident victims lived out the lifespan of their animal counterparts, not their human lifespan. Capital and Recon had been less than ten years old when the accident occurred, as were many other survivors; where Shadow and Panda had already been adults. Shadow tried not to think about these things, but inevitably, he very frequently did. How long did they have?

Shadow blinked out of his attention-deficient moment and returned to the present, watching the furry bubble rolling around on her favorite micro suede couch in the foyer of her quarters. He casually went over to hold the bottle in front of her nose. When she caught scent of it her nose began to follow it, and Shadow lifted it to get her into an upright seated position.

Just as Shadow snapped to, his radio earpiece beeped and it nestled it into his pointy ear.

“Butterfly is dead.” he heard Panda say. “Your mission is complete. Come home as soon as you have a safe chance.”

“Why did you send her to die?” Shadow bellowed with a snap at the end.

“Not the time.” Panda told him. “Just come home.”

Part 2: It’s in my Pocket

“I don’t like stuffed animals, Mommy. They’re like those ugly accident people. I want the talking army man action figure.”

The young mother appeased her son’s wishes and purchased the talking doll. Several feet below them a young woman was belted to a chair in the center of a chilly basement

chamber. She was fully human and wore a red petticoat and formal hat, just like all of Dr. Mundane's secretary candidates are required to wear.

Miles away Shadow was back in Pandacratia Headquarters being briefed by a talking echidna. Panda was already in the control room and had been since 4:30 that morning. Azrael, the echidna, explained how Panda had overcome her depression. She had replaced it with a certain level of fear since Butterfly's death. Shadow held the tiny spiny hero in one paw and paced in an elevator as he listened to the briefing.

When Azrael was done explaining he proceeded to nibble on the honorary medal around his neck.

Shadow left Azrael on his perching stool before he emerged from the elevator. He came to stand beside Panda. Her command chair was empty. Her plush little form was sinking into the giant cushion of the dispatcher's seat. The room seemed especially gray, likely to be from the fog that was flooding the tower. Shadow gazed at the reflection of little black ears poking up from over the rim of the window.

Panda shoved the dispatch microphone towards her tiny, pudgy face and began squealing out orders. "Get Mad Goose on the line! Get the general! The general!" "Stop them at Conway Corner!" "Get me a visual, Amadeus!" She scrunched up her black lips and stuffed some bamboo past them. She puffed out her belly to lean her chin against it as she leaned back.

"Shadow." She calmly observed.

"Hail the Pandacracy." Shadow quietly stated.

"Hail." said Panda, same lack of enthusiasm.

"Permission to sp--"

"Forget it. Just talk." Panda interrupted.

"I must protest the futility of Butterfly's hari-kari mission. In our small numbers there is hardly a call for casualties: even volunteering ones."

"She had a chance." Panda portrayed confidence but betrayed a glance away from Shadow at the same time. She also mouthed a second response, but didn't put any sound to it.

"We won't have the manpower to def--"

"The Pandacratia Army is numbering over two million. You just haven't seen them." It wasn't like Panda to interrupt, but it

seemed something she quickly mastered while Shadow had been away.

"I see it unlikely that you're able to hide two million furs. There aren't even that many of us in the world. There are maybe two left in Japan but they refuse to leave the zoo." argued Shadow.

"Believe me." she commanded. "I have my army and I certainly have my ways of protecting them."

"Then tell me." Shadow begged. "You used to tell me everything. Now you tell me nothing. I follow you blindly. Butterfly knew more than I do."

"I can't." Panda paused. She chewed on a stray bamboo leaf. "You will know when the time comes."

"Why do you only trust the ones you kill?"

Panda let the half-chewed leaf fall from her mouth and turned to Shadow, but he had already rejoined Azrael in the elevator. She stared down at the floor and rested her stubby front paws on the edge of the dispatch desk.

Back when they were human there truly was no such thing as a secret. The secrets began the day of the accident. The day Panda shrunk almost ninety percent and lost her humanity. That was the day Panda gained a secret so immense that she would not even tell her most trusted friend.

Shadow spent the rest of that day trying not to think about the accident.

He spent the day trying not to think of his beloved's hair, such a wonderful shade of blonde, and tumbling over her shoulders in such enchanting waves. She had the hair of a Goddess; he tried not to think that, either. He tried not to think about her smile, the one she gave him when she turned to him after stepping into the portal. She thought she was going to be part of a great moment in history. She was more correct than she ever wanted to be...

He spent the day trying not to think about the bulky silhouette of the man who broke in during the presentation of the machines and released the animals into the portals as they were activating. He watched the silhouette walk away; he tried not to think about that, either, either, either, eventually he tried to think about nothing at all...

The day several hundred curious testers were killed and the ones that remained were left to wish they joined in that fate...

Shadow looked down at his paws as he sat in his old bed at headquarters. The bedroom was just off of Panda's living room. He used to sleep on Panda's pillow next to her, but he couldn't look at her anymore. It had begun to sink in. He felt the need to "meow" at himself. He gave in to it.

He tried not to think about that blonde hair dematerializing, tearing into microscopic shreds as his half-formed paw hands thudded against the glass. He tried not to think about his spine expanding and his nose folding as his love disappeared out of sight; think about the screams from Mad Goose's portal on his opposite side as it was flooding with giant feathers...

He tried to forget that he blamed himself. He said they just had to be there. That it was a presentation, not a test. It was just a presentation. That it would be the coolest thing ever. Just like in the movies. He especially tried not to think about that.

The black cat pawing his legs just before both faded into dust, his spirit being invaded by such a foreign force, a separate entity...

He couldn't forget the terror he felt when his senses had returned... heightened. The light was so terribly bright then. Seeing the floor become larger as he fell, and watching his vomit strike down onto it... blood and gray fur... Watching a half-formed pig and ostrich both fall down and die in his peripheral vision...

He tried not to think about when they tried to "salvage" by tearing off the excess of the weakly melded hip bones and the extra set of ribs that tethered his demented lungs. He was left to live on, feeling every ache, understanding that the doctors won't risk experimenting with the toxicity of pain relievers inside of a new hybrid species like him.

Shadow stood from his bed and crept into the kitchen, letting his tail smack doorframes and table legs as he went, feeling the numb little bruises form.

Miles away a man in a pin-stripe suit paced back and forth before a young woman belted to a chair.

"You must be ashamed." The normal looking man calmly told. "You have the ability to lead a normal, peaceful life. Yet you side with those... creatures."

"You won't get away with this, Dr. Mundane. The minute I stepped into this building your secrets began transmitting directly to Panda." said the girl.

"That is good." said Dr. Mundane. "Such a non-conforming creature as Panda must see you die."

"You can't kill me." she said. "Normal people don't do that."

"Then explain wars" was Dr. Mundane's response. "You will die in a normal way. You will suffocate. But, before you do..."

A man in a white tee shirt and jeans entered as Dr. Mundane paused, and the man carried two small bags: one black and one white. Both contained something that squirmed and shuffled. The girl peered as the bags were lowered to the floor just in front of her naked toes.

"I will make sure Panda understands why you suffocated."

The girl didn't fall nervous. Not in the least. She watched solidly as the two bags began to roll back and forth. One was untied. Out onto the girl's feet popped the sweetest of creatures...

"It is called..." Dr. Mundane announced as his remaining pinstripe henchmen exited the room. "... Pocket Panda."

This tiny, perhaps four-inch tall panda bear sat on its round bottom for a moment and gazed up at the girl in the chair. It cooed and said "rarm". It rolled about. It looked exactly like the real Panda - a tiny Panda - a Pocket Panda. Dr. Mundane couldn't come up with something so clever...

"These Pocket Pandas will prevent the infestation of people like you in my pleasantly neat, perfectly normal world." he explained. "Pocket Panda multiply when they receive affection. Each Pocket Panda is programmed to beg for affection. They also grant affection to all other Pocket Pandas that come in contact with them."

Dr. Mundane released the second Pocket Panda. "You will suffocate, just like all other little girls with enough imagination to play with a Pocket Panda."

As the two Pandas began following one another around the chair, Dr. Mundane turned to pass through the double doors,

closing them behind him. He grinned to himself. "...and everyone shall reject the chaos of Pandacratric rule."

The girl in the chair looked up weakly, barely hearing his final words behind the door.

The Pocket Pandas caught up to one another between the wiry legs of the chair. A soft, high pitched "Mwa! Mwa!" rang out through the room. Then the sound began to repeat with greater and greater resonance. She could feel the hard fur against her leg and the little bodies splitting and growing as the pile of little bears spread out across the floor.

Soon the pile was at her knees.

Soon the pile was at her neck.

Soon the girl was gone.

When the room was overfilled the bears squirmed against one another and the walls, which caused them to break and die. They fell still against the human girl.

Miles away Panda fell from the dispatch chair and writhed on the floor. She was shrieking and whimpering in her tiny voice. Shadow fearfully scooped up the little Oreo bear. He watched her eyes glaze over as she fell back into her infantile state.

"What's happening to you, Panda?" Shadow begged. "Why do you go through these phases? Why do you make these strange decisions?"

Panda cuddled feebly against Shadow's chest and fell asleep.

"It's as though something is being severed..."

SYMBIOSIS

Tara O'Brien

Flowers of the undersea world.
Fleshy pastel petals
waving in the current.

A jester of swimming delight,
in harlequin orange, black, and white,
performing in the sea.

Arms of poison
stinging on death.
A predator.

Tiny and frail,
meek in might.
A prey.

The joker dances on this stage,
safe, protected, by it's bane,
the blossom happy, cared for, and clean.

A spectacle upon the reef,
for the dwellers of the twisted coral.

A tune to hum for the cleaner fish,
while shinning the shark's resting grin.

Entertainment for the remora,
as he holds tight to the ray.

And while the show is being danced,
fish mingle,

swirl,
a knotted rainbow.

The crowds a mix, but so are we.
Which is something I guess we just don't see.

Symbiosis
by definition,
Organisms, living, working,
together
for mutual benefit.

A handshake.
We could do better.

GLASS

Tara O'Brien

Glass

My world is glass.

Shattering when it's tread upon.

Bending by tomorrow's heat.

Shining with my effort's polish.

Glass

My heart is glass.

Fragile in another's hands

broken once, then re-glued.

Sparkling with its dimensional hues.

Glass

My hopes are glass.

Waiting in a craftsman's dreams.

Not meant to hide, but to be seen,

and cared for they will last.

THE MASK

Tara O'Brien

Tears.

Tears dripping from a face unfortunate,
frightening to behold.

Melancholy, mixing blues,
gelatinous black
and empty eyes.

Who is it? What is it?
Why?

It extends its offer.
A salvation?
Of course not.

Involuntary mirror tears...
sparkle as they're swept away.

Get away.

It wants to help
earnestly it tries.
Reversed should its intentions be,
for the hands that offer are the hands that need.

Crimson.
Crimson dripping from its mask,
crying to be free.

THIS LITTLE PIGGY WENT TO MARKET

Frank Peckham

Most people have never had the good fortune of trying fresh pork. After raising pigs with my neighbor Keith for the past 11 years and also having 16 years experience raising animals growing up on my grandfather's farm, I can tell you that the qualities of meat you get from a pig that you raise on your own land is superb compared to what you would buy in a supermarket.

We started doing this for a fun family hobby, something to do with our kids and family. It has worked out so well that we just never have stopped doing it. According to our town zoning laws you need two acres of land to raise any kind of farm animal whether it be a horse, cow, or a pig. Lucky for us I have just over six acres, and Keith has just over eight acres.

Where we keep the piglets is called a pig pen. The size of the pig pen depends on the number of pigs that are being raised. Sometimes we raise just four pigs, and other times we have raised nine pigs at one time. Once we know how many we are raising, we will mark off the footage and put our electric fence posts in the ground which is every six feet. Then we run the electric fence wire and connect it to the posts, starting off about four inches off the ground and spacing the other two wires about four inches apart each to keep the pigs in their pen. Inside the pen, we put a feed trough that is adjustable in height, and as the pigs get bigger we raise the fence also there is a water trough and a shelter hut for them. It looks like a three sided lean to with a roof and a four foot opening in front for them to go in and out of.

Each April, we get our pigs from Tufts Veterinary Hospital where my cousin Curtis works. We pay eighty dollars a piglet when we pick them up the pigs weigh ten pounds each. The pigs come with their shots to keep them healthy and also to prevent disease. The first week they are in their new environment they are scared

of everything, but the more you talk to the pigs when you are feeding and watering, they get to know you. They start following you around, just like a little kid wanting to know what you are doing. They will nudge you when you're in the pen because they like to be petted and talked to.

In reality, it is easy to feed the pigs; they eat once in the morning around 6:00 A.M and in the evening around 5:00 P.M. When we buy the grain feed for the pigs, we buy 200 pounds at a time for a cost of \$50.00. With four piglets, weighing ten pounds a piece, at first this amount of feed will last about three weeks. Everybody raising a pig takes a turn buying the feed. The pigs can also eat leftover vegetables, fruit, and bread, but absolutely no meat or bone of any kind. A pig that is fed right puts on ten to eleven pounds a week. So as they are growing week by week, they are eating more grain. On average, I pay \$250.00 to feed my pig from April to September.

Pigs are smart animals. They use one corner of the pen to make a mud hole to wallow around in, covering themselves in mud to keep cool and also to keep insects from biting them. The pigs will choose another spot in the pen to go do their business and dump their waste. The other eighty percent of the pen they will root up. What I mean by this is they will use their nose to dig into the ground looking ants, and grubs, any insect that crawls they will eat. They will eat every root they dig up, from dandelions, and ferns, to wild strawberries, and they will also eat little saplings and anything with bark on it.

Every once in a while, when we get a bad thunder and lighting storm, we will lose our power, and the fence will not work. The storm will scare the pigs, and they will run right through the fence, and the chase is on. Sometimes, it can take hours to round them up; other times, if they are following each other, it is easy, and we can walk them right back to the pen. It is important to catch them right away because of the coyotes and fisher cats we have around the area. The smaller they are, the harder it is to catch them, because they are so fast; the bigger they are, it's not that it is easy, but at least we can get a rope around them and bring the pigs back to the pen. This is about the hardest thing you would have to do if you were raising a pig.

When the month of September comes around, we take a special measuring tape to see how much each pig weighs. We

measure from the back of the neck to the tail, and then we measure around the thickest part of the girth area. With these measurements we can tell how much the pig weighs. When my pig Daisy starts to get close to weighing 265 pounds, we will call to schedule a day for all the pigs to be picked up and brought to be slaughtered.

The truck and trailer will come from Peltos Slaughter House to pick the pigs up at our house. My pig Daisy went to slaughter weighing 275 pounds. It is not a hard process to get the pigs into the trailer. The men let down the ramp to the trailer, and pull out a cable that is attached to an electric winch. They put a bucket over each pig's head so it will not fight, and hurt itself. Then they put a two clip harness around the chest area when the bucket and harness are in place. They hook the winch cable to the harness, and slowly pull the pig into the trailer. The trailer is divided into half length wise, four feet high running its length with straps to keep them from moving around and hurting itself. Then they remove the bucket, and the pig will calm down, and they repeat the process until all the pigs are in place in the trailer.

After slaughter there is 190 pounds of fresh pork meat. The cuts of meat I get are as follows: one-inch thick pork chops, four per pack, country style ribs, one-inch thick, four per pack, baby back ribs, one pound packages of cooking sausage, one pound packages of breakfast sausage, three five pound pork loin roasts, two five pound hams, each which are cut in half, and the same with the ham shoulders, two which are cut into spiral hams, eight half-inch thick ham steaks, twenty one pound packages of thick cut bacon. I have all the meat smoked for two reasons. First brined pork is soaked in salt, and the meat becomes too salty, you would have to soak the meat in water to get rid of the salt taste. Second smoked pork meat will last up to two years.

Nothing goes to waste; I take the liver, heart, the pig feet for pea soup, the fat back for home backed beans, and different chowders. They make up blood sausage, head cheese, and I take the ears home for my dogs. The cost to smoke and slaughter was \$54.20; if you add the cost of the feed \$250.00 with the cost of slaughter. It adds up to \$304.20. I figured it out, and it breaks down to \$1.55 per pound for everything. The quality of meat is unbelievable, the taste, texture, and the color of the meat. When you cook the pork chops or sausage or whatever the meat does not

shrink, you get very little grease, and you are eating a healthier piece of meat.

Unlike the pork you buy in a supermarket, those pigs have been injected with growth hormones, and steroids. They are fed with slop from restaurants, and stores. The grain that they eat also has growth hormones. The preservatives they add for packing and storing take away from the taste and are no good for you.

Over the years, it has been a great family experience. You get to see nature at work, and the benefits to the land are great because every year we have to move the pen. Where the old one was the grass is so thick and green with no weeds. When you lay down on it, you could go to sleep. Walking on it is so soft on your bare feet. It has become a family tradition: we all enjoy raising the pigs. The benefits are we eat healthy, and we help the land. My kid's are looking forward to owning there own home and raising there own animals someday.

WINTER SOLSTICE

Kris Danforth

For Veronica

Flaked lace
In urgent breeze
That in surrounding me
Deafens silence
It honors sacred ground

My name is on the wind
Her touch is on my shoulder
Her lips cold against my throat
Her arms still; all through
As warmth steals into my soul
The coldness burning
From hot veins

As winter Sun devours Moon
I would die
To be in her embrace
It is not much to pay
For a procession of our equinox...

DEATH SURROUNDS ME

Kris Danforth

Death surrounds me
I wear it as
though it were a cloak
warm and inviting
the breath of cold
air down the back of my neck
cold skeletal hands rest
on my shoulders
two blue glowing
eye sockets look
into mine
the bright shine
of the moon glinting
off his scythe
He rasps in
CAPITAL LETTERS
When he chooses
To speak at all
Death surrounds me

SEMPER FIDELIS

Kris Danforth

Sightless armies march
Destruction in their wake
Rampage across
Race and creed aside
Bring sorrow indiscriminately

Driven by forces
Unable to comprehend
Too tired to care
Too weary to change

Hearkening after the hollow
Call of Country
The siren song of the bugle
A will o' wisp in the night
A loyalty to a flag
An ideal to chase

Their eyes on the prize
As they leave
Blood and gore
Beneath their steady tread
These sightless armies
Marching...
Marching to Death's mournful cadence
A massacre without meaning...

NARCISSUS REVISTED

Kris Danforth

I sit in this glassy glade
Beside a mirrored pool
Gazing raptly at the reflection
Mere narcissism; a fascination of self
Perhaps a struggle
Between love & hate
With every eddy
Distorting
Twisting this all to familiar visage
Into hideous caricatures
Reflecting darker secrets
Even I shrink
At the mystery
Of unfathomable recesses
Where answers lie
What I have feared
To dare the dark and twisted byways
To the ever changing path
Through my soul
To glimpse things yet unseen
Would another reach
Where I dread to go
Unshackle the tormented prisoner
From the bonds of hope & fear
To float carelessly
With every current
Across the glassy pool
In this sacred glade.

CHILD IN THE GARDEN

Kris Danforth

When you show up like that
What am I supposed to say?

Takes a while for the bruises to heal
You tell me to escape
Before it's too late
You can't understand

Child in the garden
Tangled in danger-
Playing the smile,
And suffering... suffering alone

Daring a battle with the bastard
Who's killing me slowly

Sleepless commotion

Slash the water bed
Slash all my clothes
Smash all the crystal
And broke the window

Sleepless commotion

Police won't arrive
And I've hidden his drugs
Oh, that's made matters worse
Now he is laughing at me
His footsteps at the closet door
There is no way out

Sleepless commotion

I am praying for daybreak

I am praying for peace

I am praying for freedom

I am praying for death

All I can do is pray

THE NEIGHBOR

Karla Boll

I have always thought of myself as being very open minded. I like to think that I am educated enough to know that all people have the same needs and feelings as I do. When others would make a derogatory remark towards a group of people or a certain type of person, I would always silently shake my head and wonder how someone could be so ignorant. Why couldn't they be more like me? Why can't those people be more tolerant? Well, apparently I am not as tolerant as I always thought I was. A few years ago I found that I was guilty of labeling a certain group of people by the way they looked, by the clothes they chose to wear, by the way they acted, and even by the way they talked to each other.

I had moved to San Francisco to live with my sister in 1992. I'd been there for only about a month or so, when I started to explore the city a little bit farther than my own neighborhood. I came upon a part of the city that was beautiful. I just happened to take a left on to Castro Street, and was looking for a place to get some lunch for my son and me. Castro Street was filled with life. Each storefront was carefully painted with multiple colors. Almost every doorway had pots of flowers growing every which way. Most of the restaurants had little tables and chairs set up outside, filled with customers. It seemed as if every building flew a flag. Some of them were American flags, and some of them were multicolored like a rainbow. All the activity and color seemed to make the street come alive. I decided that we would have lunch on Castro Street.

It wasn't long before I realized that Castro Street was a favorite for the gay community. I was sure our waiter was gay. I could tell by the way he walked and talked to the other customers. He seemed very animated and overly friendly. Other customers seemed to be mostly men. They were all in groups talking, laughing, and flirting with each other. Some of them were well dressed with fresh haircuts, and some wore leather pants and

black boots. I started to feel uncomfortable, so we finished our lunch and went on our way.

A few days later, my sister and I took the kids to the park. There were a couple of men having lunch on a park bench together. I started to study the way they acted towards each other. I decided that their attire was like the gay men I saw on Castro Street. I was sure they were gay. I was sure that I could spot a gay man if I were introduced to one. I became confident that I was going to be able to accept gay people. After all, they didn't bother me, and I was a tolerant person.

Summer passed, and we started to meet people in our neighborhood. One of our neighbors who lived down the street became friendly with us. His name was John. John was a heavyset man with a big curly beard. He always had a huge smile and a joke for us. Soon he started to come over to visit one or two days a week. Our friend would stay for dinner almost every time we invited him. It was nice to have a man around because he could do all kinds of things around the house, and did them without being asked. He fixed a broken window in the garage once. He always had the right tool for every job, and didn't seem to mind getting his hands dirty.

We continued with our friendship for months. We had many nice evenings sitting in the back courtyard of our apartment house having little cookouts and telling jokes. Everything was fine until the day John and a friend of his came over to ask us to come to a 40th birthday party that was being held in John's honor. His friends were planning it for him at a club called the Eagle. The Eagle Club was down near Castro Street. Suddenly my sister and I realized that John was gay. I couldn't believe that I hadn't figured it out sooner. John didn't look gay at all. He didn't dress like the men on Castro Street. He acted very masculine. I had stereotyped John because of his looks.

As the details of the party unfolded, I found myself getting more and more tense about attending. I began to get nervous about the other guests who would be there. I was afraid to go the club that was chosen for the event because it was a well-known gay place. I was afraid that the gay men there would not be like John. I imagined that men, dressed in leather, would surround me. I thought that there would be people there who would have A.I.D.S.

On the afternoon of the party, I forced myself to get ready. My stomach was in knots. How could I be feeling this way? I was ashamed even to say anything to my sister. I knew better, but I was still having these feelings. I felt foolish, but I knew that I had to go to the party. I had grown to like John a lot.

As we entered the front door, we had to pass through a dark hallway with a black curtain at the end. I stepped in to the bar area and looked around. The bartender was wearing a leather vest with black chaps. That seemed to be all he had on. This was just as I had suspected it would be. I kept walking towards the courtyard. It was filled with men. John came to us with a big smile as soon as he saw us. He brought us to the area where his friends were. They were very gracious towards my sister and me. They brought us plates of food and glasses of beer. They gave up their seats for us. They seemed normal, just like I thought John was. I started to relax. John's friends were just as nice as John was. Some of them wore flamboyant clothes, but not every one of them. Many of the men looked as masculine as John did.

I started to talk to John's friends. One man told me how pleased he was that I had come, even though I was so outnumbered. Many of them wanted to talk about their families. One friend told me how badly he wished he could see his family, but they wouldn't talk to him because he was gay. I began to realize that these people had all the same feelings and needs that I did. I started to see them in a different light. I started to put myself in their positions. I began to admire them for doing what they needed to do to be happy, even though some of them had lost their families. I didn't care anymore about the lifestyle they had chosen.

I learned a lot from my new friends that day at the Eagle Club. I found that appearance doesn't dictate what type of a person you are. I learned that there are many types of people in the world, and I needed to meet as many of them as I could without judging them. I discovered that I could be just as guilty of stereotyping people as anyone could be.

SHADES OF NIGHT

Lindsey Reneé Lacombe

My senses are habitually assaulted. The suffocating stench of bodily secretions is nauseating to the point of regretting one's need for air. The head-splitting cacophony of brandishing swords, clashing armor and the monstrous roar of the mob, eager to see blood splash the sand, is enough to make a person covet the gift of the deaf.

Today I will die for my crimes against the Roman Emperor. My body will be broken on the edge of a sword, and

Spending my last hours amongst the other prisoners has been more agonizing than any torment they could contrive. An elderly couple are holding each other in a corner whispering and smiling. Others are leaning against the stone wall head in hands, or lying on the floor. A Spaniard seethes curses every now and then; I see he has the raw brand of an insurrectionist.

Most of the people here are slaves. The worst Roman criminal would never die this way. I am hard pressed to bear the torment of what I see now: a woman is roughly dragged in, clutching a tiny baby tightly to her chest. My guess is six months old but no more than that. The girl's eyes are wild and untrusting—my heart aches for her. My first impulse is to go to her—to offer her some comfort, maybe she would let me hold the baby so she can sleep. However the way she huddles there, trembling, exhibits a raging maternal fear. Moving to her would be unwise and instead I try to soothe her with my eyes, holding her with my gaze.

Her right arm is limp at her side and twisted in an ugly, unnatural, broken way. Probably from shielding her baby from the guard's blows. The baby coos softly, as though trying to comfort his mother as she has comforted him. Her eyes are hard and cold except for when she looks at his face. Her gentle movements and quiet undertones say he's the entire world to her. I like her.

From the nature of the guard's relentless taunting, I gather that she was a runaway priestess of Aphrodite, known in bolder circles as a temple prostitute. The woman grimaces as she tries to readjust her son better against her chest, but as she does, she starts coughing. It's a horrible sound, as if she is breaking something inside. Putting down her baby on the ground beside her, she gets on her knees with her palm on the cold, grey stone, completely subdued by the jolting convulsions. Blood drips onto the stone from her mouth. Her cough finally subsides and she lies down on the slab softly, reaches feebly for the baby, and puts her hand tenderly on his tiny chest— she doesn't move again.

I jump up and go to her side, she's dead, dead and I never knew her name. Gently I lift the dead girl's hand off the baby. He's beautiful. His eyes dart all around, studying me; smiling and making baby noises. He reaches tentatively for a tendril of my hair, in order to get the full experience he puts it in his mouth.

"Ugh, you have no idea how unwashed that is." I looked around for something for him to play with. "This is a prison, there's nothing here for you."

There is a commotion outside the door, it is slid open and two guards come in. They scan the faces, then, seeing the Spaniard they drag him out. Everyone freezes, not a sound is made; we wait. A minute goes by; two, five—then we hear it: the horrifying sound of the mob yelling with a sick glee over blood splashing the sand. Will their thirst for it never be slaked?

A small, cold panic germinates in the pit of my stomach, a panic I can only draw akin to that steel ball of fear when once I couldn't find my little sister in a crowd. What of this boy? I realize I am no longer ready to die. *God this can't be right! You created him in the secret place, you formed his fingers and toes—why would you do that? So that he can die with the dust of Roman tyranny in his mouth? Would he understand the pain God?*

The little foot nudges my arm; he's fallen asleep. What is his name? I have to get him out of here. *Lord how do I get him out?* I won't let his blood run on the scorching sand.

Carefully, slowly, I get up, hoping I don't wake—Judah, careful not to wake Judah. I step over people and at the grid-iron door I call out. A guard comes.

"Excuse me, there's a baby here." He looks at me coldly, saying nothing, I continue, "There's been a mistake."

"It's not a mistake." As he said so he slammed his javelin down hard on the metal bars. Normally, I startle easy, but I think having the baby calmed that edgy part of my mind. Judah however woke up with a little jump and began to cry.

I am about to say something but the guard utters a string of curses in Latin and I am assuming talking would only further stir his wrath. I sit down and soon Judah stops crying. A song comes to me from the past, the one my mother had sung to us so long ago, before the name of Rome was uttered in our small village. The soft melody and warm memories help me lose track of time; I am led to that place between wakefulness and sleep.

The solid form of a man materializes unbidden out of the pleasant sleepy mist. It has been so long since I have seen him, not even in my dreams have I beheld the handsome figure who was so long ago mine. He is watching me with those green eyes that were always for me and me alone. His features are soft, as they always were when he was thinking of me. He is illuminated from above, but all around him is a black fire that licks at his powerful limbs. I move towards him, but he shakes his head and in so doing immobilizes me. The light grows brighter and in reciprocation the rank, abominable fire consumes him and in a flash he disappears and with him the light. Fear and loneliness constricts my throat, I long to be with him, to hold him—my only love. In the blackness, I feel a soft wind brush gently against my face and in it I feel his touch.

Judah stirs. I am surprised at the dream, surprised that I slept at all never mind dreamed. He is looking around at things and kicking his feet. The iron grate opens and guards begin to herd the prisoners out into the dimly lit hallway. I don't know what I am going to do...but I am not so worried anymore. I walk with the others, holding Judah closely to me. We wait now, before yet another gate. Slowly the gate begins to go up, and from under the door, a hot white light peeks through, pushed onto the sand the lot of us walk into the arena. Many of them are crying, some hysterically, but I have already shed my tears. I walk with the others to the center of the arena.

After several minutes the mob begins to get impatient and taking it's cue the gladiators enter, all dressed up in various styles of Roman armor. I wonder what apostasy is being reenacted in our deaths. I hold Judah close to me, and he's still, as though he too has been bequeathed with peace.

The elderly couple cling together and even as they are slain, they fall together. Many of the slaves run screaming wildly for mercy I watch one by one as the gladiators hack the prisoners to pieces. The mob likes when they run, or try to fend the blades with their bare arms. A gladiator with a gladius, or short sword, and net comes towards me.

I close my eyes, waiting for the blow. Instead, I hear a familiar voice, "Put the baby down. I can't save you, just him."

Behind the facemask, I know its Decimus. I put Judah down and he digs his little fingers into the sand.

"Thank you." I say, as I kneel in the sand and bow my head to the ground.

Colin Progen

Last night, your bed I laid, but not so still.
The walls pushed in, and ceiling it withdrew.
I closed my eyes – pillow hit head – tranquil...
But bright dreams of past, still to come I knew.

Thank you for your height, thank you for the wheels.
Peace - known you'd value, brought by flying doves-
And even though you were blind to dark deals...
thank you for the pictures and eternal love.

And in this life people must leave a song.
I never believed I'd miss you this hard.
Smart stories are left to be passed along...

I saw face, felt arms – remembered the date.
And now, to say goodbye will have to wait.

I even miss the smell of your clean car.

OWN ME

Colin Progen

It's pouring outside, come dance with me in the rain.
Stay close because it's cold, and if you stray too far I may lose you
in the fog.
I'll take you by your hips, and spin you around as the drops pelt
the cold empty parking lot.
White lines uniform the wet-with-black pavement.
White doesn't look clean and sharp when there is no light to make
it glow.
The grey clouds loom above the gutted-out maze, and cast Sunday
shadows on the vacant buildings.
Everyone has gone home to their warm beds for the morning. That
is where I want to be.

I want to burrow into your covers, and lay flat beside you on your
left.
I want feel our skin slide smooth together. Let our legs mingle, and
our hands wander.
Let the warmth between us heat up the frost bit room. Let us melt
away the ice sculptures of our pasts.
We'll form bodies of water that reflect our future like a crystal ball.
Should I strain my gaze and penetrate the mirror-like surface to
ruin the surprise?
I don't want to stand too close to the edge for if I fell in with a
splash, I'd drown.
Could you revive me? If you make time slow down, I'll stay with
you here in your place.

I'll sit on the edge of your bed if you kiss my back.
I'll lie on top of you if you take your shirt off. I want to feel the
pounding of your heart bang inside your chest against mine.

I want you to breathe on my neck as I reach into you, and draw up you closer to me.

Let me reach behind you and hold you up, up high on a pedestal. I'll let you run your finger tips down my sides if you wrap your arms around me.

Don't let go.

Hold me as if a higher power was yanking me away from you, out of your arms.

Hold me.

I'm yours.

Own me.

Face to face I look into you bottomless eyes. I know you want me. I know you feel the raging flames of passion. I know you can taste me on the tip of your tongue when you press your lips against mine.

A smile.

I know I can hear your heartbeat elevate when I touch you like this... or like that...

And when I make this little noise, I know you'll follow it with that one.

If I knew I could stay forever in your eyes, and forever here in your bed, I know I could let you own me.

I know I could let you own me like the first steps on the moon. Lay your flag down on me.

I know I could let you own me like a front row seat at one of my favorite shows.

You can own me like the road owns the leaves as they fly around my car when I drive up North to see you...

-to lay with you.

Let me own you.

May hands come down from the ceiling and lift the covers over our heads.

I'll crawl up close to you and not let you go until the sun has reached its peak in the mid-day sky.

Let the light burn though the blanket and into our eyes. We'll do nothing but love and touch.

Hydrate me with your love... make it last all day.

But this morning is a lonely one; you're too far away; so I'll allow this pouring rain to hydrate me now.

Let it seep into my pores and replenish my life.

I'll walk to the middle of the lot; I'll reach out my arms in front of me. I'll begin to spin slow in circles, and sway side to side.

I'll stare up at the colorless life above me, and let the beads of water collect in the corners of my mouth; they will burn my eyes.

Then, I'll whisper your name, and it'll ring sweet and deep in a halo around my head.

It will echo past my ears so that only I can hear it.

I'll tightly press my eyes closed again and be back in your bed until the mid-day sun has reached its peak in the damp, dull, November sky.

JOHNNY GONIE AND MY JALAPENO

Amanda Debrezeni

His image foxed past me. His bike was breaking down. The neon light beyond him stung my eyes. Or maybe it was this green goo in my eyes. Maybe it was radioactive. God it tasted awful, it was getting in my mouth. Kind of like curry with jalapenos. His gas gauges were bursting and it was spewing all over the road. He tore off his helmet and threw it behind him.

Johnny Gonie never said hello. He just held the back of his hands up towards whoever he was visiting. My father's experiments weren't going well at all. Johnny knew my apprenticeship was like that, but now that he was seeing how badly it really was going, he was laughing harder than he ever had. His bike popped like a bubble and he ducked from the sparks and flame.

Eh, he would get another one. He was rich.

His steps were robotic, like the swinging lights of the inner city up on Tin Hill. Tin Hill looked sick at night. All the strip clubs lit up their signs and the aluminum ground cover stretched it out across the hill. The giant naked ladies were something I got used to pretty early on. Outsiders come to Leopard City and think Tin Hill is disturbing, even vulgar, but these kinds of adjectives have little meaning in places like my back yard. The bike lit the dry weeds that we called our lawn on fire but I didn't worry about it. It never caught on for long enough to make anything interesting happen. One time the house lit on fire but the metal cuts it off from reaching anyone else's yard. They ran out of grass on Tin Hill a few years before I was born, they all told me. That's interesting. The outsiders say that grass is something that grows back. It really makes you wonder what's growing under there instead of the grass. Couldn't be worse than this jalapeno curry.

Johnny Gonie waved his gloved hand in front of my face. He had one of those grins that was just too big. It was that "I stole something good today" look. Nothing made Johnny happy more than hitting the streets with a good kicker and some crooked Mickies. For whatever reason the Leopard City Jumpers were convinced that "Kicker" was a better word than "Driver" and "Micky" was the new word for "Thief." A Micky was a professional thief, that is. Johnny wasn't a Micky, not yet at least, just a Jumper. I wasn't even a Jumper. Leopard City was like an entire city of thievery, trendy frat boys, and lustful women that had lost their way just a little too early in life. I had never had a woman before at that point, and even now I've never had a woman anything like the ones Johnny had, even then when we were still just a couple of ruddy teens. I wanted to take over my father's business, at least at one point I thought that was what I wanted, but now I was sitting there with my diseased face in the heat of the Tin Hill lights and I was thinking things over.

Here it comes.

"I stole something good tonight." Johnny announced.

"Sure you did." I tried to wipe my face again, but the goo was coming out of my own body, so it was a bit hopeless. Just wanted to keep it out of my mouth. It was so horribly unnatural. I couldn't fathom how the experiment had gone so wrong. It was a simple procedure. It was a new chemical but a simple procedure. My dad warned me when I started training with him that his line of work was dangerous in really strange ways, but I never imagined this. They would later name the chemical after me and use it for absolutely nothing.

"I started puking out of my forehead tonight." I announced, mimicking his cocky tone. "And it glows in the dark."

"Forehead puke. What a great concept." Johnny slapped his knee and chuckled it all out as much as he could. Then he snapped serious.

He looked dizzy, of course. He never really went serious. He just pursed his lips a bit while he was talking, and pointed towards his feet, that was his serious stance. He still held his shoulders crookedly and wobbled about, looking over his sunglasses which were currently not on, but he never seemed to realize when they were on or off, he wore them so often.

"So get to it already. What did you steal?" It wasn't a question, it was more like my way of saying let's talk about it so we can talk about something else afterwards.

"I'm raising a war, Jayjay."

"What do you mean?" I scratched my oozing pores as I listened.

Johnny licked his lips as he pulled a thick silver chain with a tiny diamond on the end from his own neck. He kissed the diamond.

"You stupid shit." I told him. "Go give it back, they'll eat you alive."

He wiggled his tongue over it gleefully. "Yeah, you know what it is." He mused.

It was Kelly Rider's lucky chain. Kelly was the untouchable goddess of the Leopard underbelly. Her tiny diamond and red leather glamour were the wasteland of every man's dreams across the entire city. Criminal women have weird fetishes, I guess. They preferred to be something of slaves to the men that they tagged along with, and Kelly had already been the Helen of a Trojan war a few years back. She was snatched up by the young new boss at an art exhibit and blood rained on the streets for her. Things like that always made Johnny jealous, and jealousy drove Johnny mad.

I watched him dance, pointing his toes and prancing in a spin, the chain dangling. Sometimes Johnny made me feel like I was in a sitcom, the kind where one guy hangs out with another, and he's dumb as a friggin' monkey, and he has no idea why he puts up with the dumb guy. But Johnny was fun, I would admit it later, I knew.

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to pay Max-on's favorite pawn a visit and throw it right in his face."

"They'll fucking eat you alive. They know you."

"That's where you come in, you beautiful, beautiful man."

Mickies had a thing about calling each other beautiful men.

I instantly turned the other way and headed back towards the toxic shack I called home. "No fucking way, Johnny. You're out of your mind."

"Just tell them the truth."

"They'll still fucking kill me." I bickered. "You're a retard, Johnny."

He laughed at me, bending almost all the way backwards and hollering his laughter into the sky as I continued.

"You're a fucking retard. You should put it right back where you got it from and tell Maxmic how sorry you know you're going to be."

"Jayjay, Jayjay, the city has been so quiet. What's the point of staying in Leopard city if the leopards have stopped pouncing?"

Johnny dressed me in a suit and I hit the boulevard with green shit still spilling out. He slapped a bowler on my head and told me to say that it was hair gel. He said Max-on has a thing with hair gel. I thought about Aimee, Johnny's girlfriend, as I wondered through the corner front of Shimmy's Pawn Shop. There the red leather goddess was leaning right over the glass counter with an intense continence. I dropped the necklace next to her and looked up at Shimmy. She was the clueless looking blonde with a glittery bustier and scampish leather shorts.

"I got this from some guy on an exploding motorcycle." I told Shimmy. "Do you think it's worth anything?"

Kelly punched me so hard that I fell over onto my side, and the two babes found themselves screaming as though they'd seen a rat, but really, they'd just seen the glowing goo fly out of my head as I fell, and it splatter all over the bottom of the cases. It must have looked like my neon brain was knocked out of my skull. They were a bit speechless and still after that, and I had a chance to recompose myself while they stood there.

"No?"

"You little pricks." Kelly told me. "You little pricks." It was a beautiful use of repetition.

I let the smartass that was usually dormant rear his ugly head. "Come on now, I've almost reached nine, that's got to be six inches longer than Max-on."

Kelly was about to punch me again, but instead she simply glared.

"Gonie."

She knew the nickname for her invincible lover. I think her blood was boiling. "Tell your exploding friend that his rocket isn't getting my jewel for himself."

"I don't think he likes sloppy seconds anyways." I shrugged. "I don't think he likes thorny thirds either."

The second punch knocked me out. I woke up in a very dark place with a very dark face scowling at me.

"Ma-ha-haaaaax..." I said, as though he was an old friend. At first I couldn't tell what compelled that reaction.

"Don't talk to me." He stared at me. It was creepy. I realized he was trying to sew up my forehead, but alas, he couldn't find a wound.

"It should clear up." I assured him. "Sorry if it's getting your place a mess."

Maxmic, the legendary rookie, put his tools down in the shadows and came back to his squat next to me.

"Your friend isn't going to clear up very well if he keeps fucking around like that. But you seem useful. You have some kind of style. I might have a job for you."

"You're not gonna fucking kill me?" I didn't mean to sound disappointed, I just hate being wrong, even if being wrong means not being dead.

"Gonie is gonie get triple licked." Max said, scratching the back of his head, and I watched his frosted bangs fall over his black eyes the way that mine do sometimes. "But I don't kill people. There's a difference between a criminal and a killer."

I looked away from him for a moment and let the thought sink in. "She's a tough chick." I said.

"I know; that's why I had to have her."

"What job do you think you have for me?"

Maxmic chuckled. He was so metrosexual that it made me get really uncomfortable. He chuckled like a damn woman.

"You're wasted as a decoy." Max's voice became firm, but I still felt like I was in a sitcom, like I had with Johnny. "I want to put you behind the curtain."

"This acidic crap might burn through the fabric." I replied weakly.

"Don't worry." Max told me. "Your father is a genius. You just don't know it yet."

With that, Max wandered off into the dark and left me all alone. He told me I should give it some thought.

I wiped a little more of the jalapeno grime off of my forehead. Max knew my father. Why didn't I figure that out at some point? I sat up and crossed my legs, spinning Johnny's

bowler around on my fingertips. Pa used to say I would be a criminal someday, but I thought he just meant that I was always misbehaving when I was a little boy. And I chuckled to myself, and I started to sound like a woman. I found the truth out later.

...Max was my half brother.



AnnMarie Ferguson

UNDERSTANDING

Karla Boll

My brother hit a line drive, and the ball went skipping through the long grass leaving a trail behind it where it splashed in the evening dew. My sister started running off to the wrong base. Her scraggly ponytails flopped behind her as she ran. She wasn't even part of the team. She was too young and couldn't throw the ball more than ten feet, but she just kept hanging around even after we told her to go back inside.

"All you kids come in here and do these dishes," my father yelled from the back door. He let it slam with a snapping sound. How we even got past him in the first place was a surprise to me. He probably had to take a call. He was always getting calls from patients, even after office hours. The phone was always ringing, and I was expected to be able to answer it like a secretary. I hated that. People would call and act like I was a nurse. They were always asking me questions about their kids that I couldn't answer. These were kids who I went to school with. I hated knowing who had smelly diarrhea, or who got a bloody nose for a full hour the night before. I didn't want to hear the details about my classmates.

My brothers and I trudged in to the kitchen and started to clear the dining room table. The ice cream was melting and oozing through the sides of the carton and onto the tablecloth. I guess we had been out there longer than I thought. I put my hands into the hot soapy water and watched them turn red while I washed the dishes. As I turned my back, I could hear my brothers whispering as they quietly slipped away. I'd be stuck doing the dishes all by myself again, with only my little sister twirling around in circles on the linoleum, chattering the whole time in her high, squeaky voice. She was no help at all.

My dad walked through the kitchen and eyed the carton of melted ice cream in the trash. "Tomorrow you will do the dishes

immediately after dinner," he announced in his most stern voice. A tiny bit of his German accent slipped out when he said it. He didn't seem to notice that my brothers were nowhere in sight. I didn't answer. It didn't do any good to stand up for myself with dad. May as well just do what you were told, and get out as soon as possible.

I didn't like dad very much. I spent most of my time avoiding him. His temper made me nervous. I spent a lot of time trying to keep my brothers and sister in line, so I wouldn't have to hear him yell. Dad was always so concerned about his practice. The patients always seemed to come first. Don't get me wrong, I understood, even at that age, that my dad's work was important, but why couldn't he be nicer when he was home?

I finished the dishes and wiped down the sticky counters. I didn't feel like joining the rest of the gang for a ballgame anymore. I picked up the newspaper and read the headlines. "Local clothing store robbed and burned overnight. All inventory taken. Police believe it was a professional job."

Now this was interesting to me. The owner of the store was Mr. Goldsher. He was the uncle of a friend of mine. He was a kind man who spoke with a soft, smooth voice. He always treated me with respect, even though I was only fourteen, and he knew I wasn't going to buy any of his fancy, tailored men's suits.

Mr. Goldsher walked with a severe limp. I never found out what had happened to him to make him limp so badly. I used to watch him walk slowly up to the podium during services at the Star of David Temple, where I would go with my Jewish friend on Friday nights. (I was Catholic, but this was the only way we could get my friend's mom to let her go out to play afterwards.) Mr. Goldsher would read the mysterious, musical Hebrew words in that soft voice of his. I felt so sorry for him. He seemed so vulnerable.

My teenage years rushed by me. Not much ever changed between my dad and me. I knew he was a prominent man. People were always pointing that out to me. "We just loved your father," they would say. "He took care of all four of my children. Why, he even saved my little Ralphy's life one day." Those are the kinds of things I would hear, even after my father had retired and moved to California.

One day, years later, I found myself back at the Star of David Temple to celebrate a Bar Mizvah. I knew quite a few of the guests who were attending, since I had been to so many services there as a child. A thin, old man approached me. I recognized him immediately because of his familiar limp. He made introductions, and then proceeded to tell me a story.

Mr. Goldsher told me about a day he would never forget. The day he walked in to his store to find it empty and partially burned down. Only the clothing racks were left behind in a scorched mess. The smell of burnt plastic was so strong he could taste it. Apparently, the thieves had backed a tractor-trailer truck up to the back door and took every bit of inventory and then lit the building on fire. The store was ruined. Mr. Goldsher told me that he put his face in his hands and cried for a long time. All that he had worked for was gone. He knew that the minimal insurance he carried would never replace the inventory that he had purchased from the manufacturers in the clothing district of New York. He was devastated. He didn't know where to turn.

The next day Mr. Goldsher went back to the store to view the damage. It looked even worse. Dark puddles of water filled one corner of the display room. Ceiling tiles hung down and dripped like rain from a gutter. Mr. Goldsher told me he felt like ending his life.

Suddenly he could hear a loud knocking at the front door. He went to the window and pulled up the torn shade. He could see through his tears that it was my father. He shook his head, and told him through the smudged glass, that he would not be open for business anymore. My father banged even harder until the door shook. Mr. Goldsher let him in.

Mr. Goldsher told me that was when my father announced. "I would like to order seven new suits. I want to have them tailored to fit, and I'd like to pick them up in six weeks." Mr. Goldsher told me that he looked at my father with despair. "Can't you see that I have been robbed?" he asked with a cracked voice as he hung his head. "I have no inventory left. I have nothing to sell you." He had given up. It was then that my father said, "Well, you still have one customer left, and I would like to place an order." Mr. Goldsher told me that, at that one single moment, he felt hope. He felt there was a reason to go on.

Mr. Goldsher found a way to make the seven suits for my dad. He also brought his business back successfully. Mr. Goldsher told me, "That day your father gave me a reason to go on."

After the day at the Temple, I felt differently about my dad. Hearing Mr. Goldsher tell me that story, with tears in his eyes, I realized what a great man my father really was. I hadn't seen it through the eyes of my childhood. I had been jealous of all those other people taking up so much of his time. But, I finally understood that he was doing what he *had* to do, those many years ago. My father had tremendous foresight and responsibility. So many people in our small town had relied on him. He *couldn't* let them down. And I don't think he ever did.

JUSTICE IS BLIND

Andrew Mello

Today was the day. When the sun reaches the top of the sky, they will hit the switch... and subsequently I will fry. Alone in this row, where others await for three day; now I'm the star, even if it's only for a day.

"Hey shit face," said the gluttonous prison guard whose name tag said Jeremy. Once you're here for long enough, even subtle things like a name tag you begin not to trust. That sick bastard has been reminding me every day for a month now, that he will be the one pulling the switch. "Aren't you excited? Today is the day!" said Jeremy, obviously excited by the idea him self. "Its 10am, so in two hours... your mine." As he pointed his finger at himself, in a way signifying that I was his.

"Don't I get a last meal?"

Jeremy gets this sick fucking grin on his face when he is about to say something he thinks is clever. And right now the grin was in full bloom. "What's the point when you're going to shit it out in a few hours anyway!" He turned, laughed, and walked away. I could hear his chuckle fade down the hall.

How did it come to this? As a child making castles on the beach, never would I think I would be in prison, let alone be put to death. I took a few deep breaths trying to clear my mind... but it wasn't working. The end of my life was staring me right in the face. The mere thought made my digestive fluids rise.

Two more hours... how should I use the time? I lie in my cell, and shut my eyes. Though no sleep could come, it felt good to shut my eyes. The air was hot, dry, and ever so often the cool southern Mexican breeze entered through my barred window. Like water splashing on my face, the breeze calmed me... but it did no good to extinguish the fire of thought burning in my mind. I wonder if anyone will miss me, if any one in this whole god damn world would care if I was gone. All the friends and family I had

deny there relation to me. No visitors, no nothing. I was truly alone.

The one free choice I got in this prison was the way I was going to die. I'm not sure why I picked the electric chair. A lethal injection would go over easier... but I was never too fond of needles. In any case, I hope I get killed on the first try. I don't want to be a drooling retard for a few moments.

With a shock to my system, my eyes opened wider than ever before as I hear the many foot steps move down the hall. This is it. Fuck. I felt my heart begin to race as my breath picked up in tempo. The foot steps stop in front of my cell; I turn my head to see the warden, Jeremy (with a big fucking grin on his face), and two other guards.

"Jacob D. Prescott, the time has come for you to pay for your crimes." Said the wrinkled old warden. "Step forward."

As I get off my bed I say "I thought I had two hours before noon." I see Jeremy's stupid fucking grin grow wider. He was holding back his chaotic laughter in front of the warden.

"It's 11:30 son, your two hours was an hour and a half ago," said the warden, stating the obvious.

I hear the buzz and the shift of metal rubbing against metal as the bars slide open. The pungent odor of the warden's cologne stains my nostrils. It was the kind of cologne only an old man would wear to hide the smell of his rotting fucking flesh. I look at Jeremy, to see his grin up close. His teeth were visibly rotting. The smell coming off them was like curdled milk, with a hint of human decomposition.

Jeremy says under his breath, "your mine..." now with a full projection, "Turn around." I turn around to get my arms and legs all chained up. I keep my head down as I walk with my captors behind and ahead of me. I see the huge metal door at the end of the hall. That was the place where my existence would come to an intentional halt.

I hear my fellow inmates say a spectrum of different things as I walk down the hall. Some spewing built up hate because they have no other way of getting it out. Some give me religious lectures, but I tune those out. Others wish me good luck. I am thank full for the ones who wish me luck; there the ones who know how fucked up this death penalty really is.

The hallway was almost over; the door was getting closer. If there was anytime to pull something crazy, it would be now. I compose myself and then fall to the floor sobbing the fakest tears a grown man could produce.

"I'm innocent, I'm innocent!" I plead for my life. "You're putting the wrong man under, this is fucking unjust." The guard a head of me turns around and comes down to my level in an attempt to consul me.

The other prisoners go wild.

"He's innocent, you fucking murders!!"

"Let him free!"

"You should be sentenced to death!!"

One prisoner close by spits in the wardens old fucking face. Jeremy, hot headed as usual, gets up in the prisoners face and unsheathes his baton. Then as if there was a god, I see an opportunity like a divine gift from above. With a haste only a man being put to death could produce, I rise to my feet and run backwards, slamming into Jeremy making his fat fucking head hit the bars. Frantically, I reach for his gun... I got it.

"Hey stop!!!" A guard yells trying to control the situation.

Like a mad man, I run in the opposite direction of my death. With the gun behind me I shoot and shoot and shoot, hoping that I kill all who are in back of me. I reach the end of the hall way only to hear cheering and the lack of foot steps pursuing me. I turn around to see what I had done. Fours bodies not moving; I grin a grin only Jeremy could accurately perform. I run over to get the keys only to see a mass of blue liquid pouring out of my victims.

"What the...?"

Then muffled in my head I hear words that I can't quite make out... and then I realize as I open my eyes to see Jeremy poking me with his night stick.

"Get up, it's time." Said Jeremy; only this time he wasn't equipped with his silly grin. I fell asleep. My last "free" time on this earth and I fell a sleep. At least Jeremy wasn't lying to me.

"Stand up and turn around" I see Jeremy and two other guards. They cuff my arms and legs and push me down the hall. I see the door. Once I go in that door, I will never come out alive. As I walk by the prisoners they give me there respects... for all the inmates in this sector have the same grim fate as me. Unlike my

dreams I don't freak out and grab Jeremy's gun. The stale taste of reality bites my tongue.

Jeremy walks ahead of me and opens the door to my death. Made of the same solid steel as the bars that kept me contained for three years, it opened with a long recognizable squeak. A sound I heard on numerous occasions, a sound that I'm sure freighted every man in the cell block where I used to belong... used to belong... the thought stays in my mind, reaffirming the inevitable fate that awaited me behind this squeaky fucking door. As I walked through the door way I could see the chair. It looked so much different in my imagination. A part wooden, part leather chair, fully equipped with straps for all my limbs (including my neck) and a metal head piece that would deliver the fatal blow. My heart began to pick up speed. The adrenaline was pumping into my body trying to relive my brain of the inevitable termination it was about to receive.

As I passed through the door way, I could hear the squeak of the door shutting behind me. That was the last time I heard that god damn squeak. A guard undid my cuffs. That was the last time I felt metal restraints on my skin.

"Sit down." Jeremy said with an electric razor buzzing in his hand. His face was completely lacking the grin that I was sure he was going to have. As I sat down on the chair I thought of all the people who have died in this seat. All the last meals that have been shat where I was sitting. The thought terrified me even more. The two guards strapped the leather restraints around all my shivering limbs.

I looked to my left to see a huge mirror and my reflection starring back at me. It had been a while since I had seen what I looked like. My hair was long black and gritty from not properly washing it for three years. My hair, connected to my dirty beard. I didn't know where all the hair was coming from, I was a mess. My eyes were sunk into dark circles in my head. So many restless nights... In all honesty, I didn't recognize myself... what have I become. As I starred at myself, I was so shocked, that I didn't realize the glass was there so the people witnessing my death could see me. I wonder whose eyes I was connected with.

"Look straight" Jeremy ordered as the razor forcibly rid my head of all its dirty unfamiliar hair. I could see a clock hanging from the wall in front of me.

"Five more minutes" Jeremy said. I no longer cared about him and whether he was the one to flip the switch. He was a representation of the system I was put through. I heard the razor stop buzzing. I turned my head left to right... I could feel my hair was gone. Everything seemed much realer now.

I heard the door next to the false mirror open and the warden came out. Just like my dream, he had strong cologne on. And just like my dreams, he put it on to prevent people from smelling his old rotting fucking flesh.

"Jacob Prescott, on behalf of the Texas penal system, due to the crime of first degree murder, on January 5th 1996, at 12'o clock PM, you are to be electrocuted till death. Do you have any last words?"

Last words. I haven't thought about that at all. I said the first thing that came to my mind. "Who is behind that glass?"

"The family and friends of the poor girl you murdered," said the warden; protecting the people's identities.

I turned to the glass and said, in an unthought manner. "I... I am truly sorry... I really am. That night I was drunk trying to get home... Something I'm sure many of you have done. I didn't want to kill your daughter... friend... cousin... how ever you were related to her." I took a few breathes. My heart was beating so fast it felt like I was going to vomit. I suppressed the urge and kept on talking... after all this was the last moments of my life. "I was on the verge of having a good life. I just got my masters degree in biochemical engineering. I would have been researching to save lives, but instead I took life away. Funny how life works out." The words came out more fluidly now.

"One minute left." Jeremy so kindly informed me as he wet the sponge in a bucket.

"As sorry as I am, there is nothing I can say or do to change what is about to happen to me. So with all my heart... with all my god damn dying breaths I know all of you behind that glass and in this room will be burning in hell with me. When you die I will be waiting, ready to pluck your eyes out so you will be blind as this judicial system that you murders hide behind. You know this isn't right. You could have sent me away for life, but you sentenced me to fucking death..." the words poured out of me with all the build up emotion I had held in all these years. I felt the wet sponge

touch my freshly shaved head and the clamping of the metal cap that was lowered on my skull.

"I am not going to exist after this; I'm trying to fight it but this is the end for me. What if you were in my shoes, what the fuck would you people do... because goddamn it, I don't know what to do." Tears began to roll down my face though I wasn't crying. It was like my body weeping for me. I glanced at the clock and for some reason I counted down the seconds aloud like it was a new year.

"10,
9,
8,
7,
6,
5,
4,
3,
2.."

I turned my head toward the glass so they could see my eyes as the life escaped them. "1... see you all in hell."

I smiled as a billion needles jolted through my convulsing body. After a while the pain wasn't so bad anymore. I began floating above my vacant body. The vomiting sensation had been replaced with a feeling I could only describe as "free". I was no longer bound to my mortal form. Just then every thing turned grey as I slipped into an impenetrable darkness. My thoughts no longer moved. Stuck in mud, with nothing left to prove.

A NEW BEGINNING: PROLOGUE

Nicholas Gracie

With every new beginning comes an end. While with time, with every rising power, comes a nation's atrophy. What may have once been may now be long since forgotten. Legends that once were, stories once told, passed down from generation through generation, from one end of the world to the next, are now lost. What once was may yet come again, for every age has a new beginning.

A vigorous wind swept in the from west front with dismaying force, howling to the point where it was hard to hear his own thoughts. The faithful servant who called himself Calsir nearly toppled over as he dismounted his dark bred gelding. Something laid hidden in layers of blood sodden cloths, wrapped carefully in his arms; something to be handled with extreme caution and delicacy, yet it was indestructible, and more important than perhaps what his own life was worth—the meretricious life he had come to believe his own. Not a soul knew what secret he carried, or if they did, they were now dead—not even his own master whom he served humbly. Years had come and gone, lost to wars, to tears, and personal bloodshed. But now the relentless search was over.

Trudging through the thick black mud, Calsir made his way to the Black Tower; with his heavy wet clothes weighing him down, and his hood up over hid head, hiding all his face in shadows. Only a long bridge stood between him and the tower—only a couple hundred paces long but a drop to his demise if he slipped and fell into the boiling ocean of molten lava. The rain made the bridge all too slippery, and he had far too many years and his own blood spilt into this quest to slip and fall. Surely he would be exiled or worse, banished to Tormensi'r, where he would be forever fated to live out the ages in the nightmarish dream world if he dropped the precious singleton into the inferno below.

Thunderclaps crashed and lightning flashed continuously across the night sky as he made his way up the blackish marble staircase. His heart already racing and he had yet to even confront his master, though there was no doubt that the Dark Lord didn't already know of his arrival. *He, who lives amongst the shadows, sees all.*

As the giant heavy doors creaked open, a shrill shriek echoed through the night—a familiar perilous cry. Calsir had heard the sound a thousand times over, but never coming to enjoy it anymore than that first time all those countless years ago. He despised the beast, for it *was* the reason behind this quest. It was *the* dragon. Black as night, and more blood thirsty than any of the Cadarae or Creatures of the Dark he had ever led into battle. He had only seen the beast on a fair few occasions in all his years serving under his master, and he cared not to come face to face with the dragon again, so long as he was still alive.

The dragon's shriek pierced the night once more, and before it had a chance to so much as take another breath, the door behind Calsir was shut. Surely it was upset about the rain, and couldn't leave its hold without getting wet. At least the tower had thick walls to keep the sounds of the shrill cries and rain out.

Inside was dark. Shadows illumed the anteroom, and a taint that felt thick and heavy filled the air. Only a couple of lamps were lit on the walls, giving off just enough light to see any obstructions, but still most everything loomed in shadows. Lucky for Calsir, he knew the tower well enough to know his master would either be upstairs in his personal quarters, or in the grandest of rooms which had been given the name, Antium.

Given the time a night, Calsir moved towards the stairs with swift steps, wanting nothing more than to rid himself of the burden he carried. Each step brought a *squishing* against the dark marble tiled floor. Under the masked composure he had mastered over the years, his hands and knees trembled, and his blood ran cold. Though outside, he looked as composed as carved stone.

Where is everyone he thought to himself? It was late, and most people were naturally hours into their sleep by now, but not here. Not in the Black Tower. Servants who served the Dark Lord, who lived in the small villages outside, on the outskirts of the tower, came up to do *his* bidding, and were usually around all

hours of the night. No one ever really slept more than a couple hours at once, and lucky for that.

Lamps hung from the outside wall were lit as he ascended the stairs. The stairs went up in an ever turning curve—spiral-like. When he got but halfway, he heard voices coming from above, though not able to understand what was being said. Instinctively Calsir reached for and wrapped himself in Vai'tar—even if he couldn't match his master's skill, he could defeat anyone else who might have broken into the tower—and grabbed the hilt of his sword that hung from the frog on his belt. Ages of practice had honed his skill.

As two shadows appeared up ahead, Calsir braced himself, ready to unleash a torrent of the ancient power if he had to. But when the two shadows became two servants descending the stairs, he let go his sword hilt, and more reluctantly released the sweet warmth of the ancient power. Both servants were clad in dark crimson robes, and their faces hidden beneath their hoods. Golden sashes were tied around their waists, and diamond patterned scrollwork embroidery around the cuffs. Baggy sleeves and bottoms hid their hands and feet.

Instantly, both servants froze as they saw Calsir standing there—and probably would have fell from fright if they could feel Calsir wrapped in Vai'tar—but after a few moments they bowed simultaneously. Keeping their heads bowed down, one spoke diligently. "Forgive us, Master Calsir, we were just..." but Calsir cut him off before the servant had a chance to finish.

"Never mind what you were doing," Calsir barked, not caring what they were up to. "I have other matters that need attending to right away." *And it doesn't involve dealing with bloody, half witted servants* he thought to himself. "Now, where is the Dark Lord?"

Slowly one of the servants raised his head; his facial expressions still hidden in shadows. "But Master, the Dark Lord is not here..." Nothing could hide the tremor in the servants' voice.

"What do you mean?" Calsir's voice was beginning to rise, though there was no cause. Not that he cared much. "Where in the bloody heavens could he be?"

"Master, we were just about to tell you..." the servant began to say, but fell silent as Calsir gave him a horrific glare. Silence fell, and Calsir held his glare. When Calsir didn't say anything, the

servant continued, "The Dark Lord should be arriving momentarily, and we were rushed as we thought we heard Sheiken's perilous cry. We were just going to prepare for his arrival." So the flaming dragon was out in the rain. Good. Calsir had no remorse.

Frustration and bewilderment surged through Calsir's veins. It was not very often for the Dark Lord to take leave without he himself knowing. Too much time had already passed, spent searching for this artifact of magical properties, and he had no desire to wait any longer. However, he did find repose in knowing that the search was over, and he could now be exempted from his duties that he had long endured over the centuries. Maybe live here, in the Black Tower for the remainder of his days, and with his gift to the Dark Lord, he would live *like* a king.

Finally he spoke, though agitated and fierce. "Go prepare his arrival, then bring him to the Antium; I will be waiting his arrival there. Bring him *straight* to me, for there are urgent matters at hand. And bring no one else!" Together the servants bowed, and hurried down the stairs. "Bloody servants," he mumbled under his breath when they were out of earshot. "They best not forget, or the Dark Lord will be left with two less servants..."

Without delay—not even giving time to *harrumph* with frustration—Calsir was down the stairs, pushing open the tall, heavy-set doors into the Antium. Solid stone pillars stood to the high ceiling in long, parallel rows. Crimson carpet paneled the floor, and tapestries hung down from the windows. Silence filled the room, for not even at this time of night, not even a fire burned in the hearth. Embracing Vai'tar, Calsir soon gave the room an abundance of light and heat with a crackling fire. Flames sparked up in the lamps around the room with a quick release of Vai'tar.

Calsir waited impatiently, pacing back and forth in front of the fire. The gift in which made him so uneasy, sat upon a small table a few paces away. He knew what it was, and why it was important, yet he sought only to rid himself of the responsibility. Let it be somebody's—anybody!—else's burden!

Suddenly, the doors to the Antium burst open as if an explosion erupted in the anteroom, but no one entered. It had not been *that* long and surely the servants wouldn't come without the Dark Lord.

Stepping towards the door, Calsir was stopped in shock as a loud plea echoed from the far side of anteroom. Moments later a servant flew through the Antium, crashing through a large pane of glass, screaming. Then not before the sound of glass shattering ceased, the second servant came flying through the room, screaming undistinguishable pleas—no doubt for mercy—and crashed through another pane of glass, neighboring where the first servant went through. It didn't take long for Calsir to remember that just below this room, was Sheiken's lair.

Knowing who was making his way from the anteroom, Calsir straightened himself upright, and prepared himself for the Dark Lord's entrance. That last breath before his master appeared rolled heavily over the lump in his throat.

"Has my war finally ended, Calsir? Do we finally have the last of the sacred dragon eggs?" The Dark Lords' voice brought chills down Calsir's spine, even though he had known it for as long as he could remember. "Tell me, my faithful Calsir, has our war been worth these countless years of bloodshed and death?"

Stepping into the light, Calsir could see the smoke gray tunic his lord wore. A white insignia of the finest needlework was stitched over his breast, and a black cloak hung loosely from his shoulders. He appeared invisible save for his eyes until he came within a few feet of Calsir. His face was grim, a detailed map of boredom and evil, outlined with fatigue; his ears were strangely pointed, but not like that of an elf. His boots *clanked* with each step, and when took another step closer, the markings on his hands were faintly visible over the shadows. But Calsir had seen them often enough to know what they were. On the center of his palm was a matching insignia of that on his tunic, which was enveloped by a coiling flame—as was on his tunic. On both of his forearms appeared more markings that resembled scales. Black dragon scales, black like Sheiken's.

Bowing, Calsir finally said, "Humbly I present to you, the last of the dragon offspring." Using Vai'tar, he levitated the egg to his master, who immediately unraveled the cloth. "We have finally..."

Cutting him off, the Dark Lord spoke hastily. "Is this the last...the *only* surviving egg remaining?" Calsir nodded, and was opening his mouth to speak, but was cut off before getting the chance. "Then we have nothing left to fear. The time of the Dragon

Riders is diminished." A malicious grin broadened across the Dark Lords face. "Tell me, Calsir, was there much of a fight when you found this egg that I now hold?"

"No," Calsir said, though there was something that made him uneasy, and it showed in his voice. "It was almost as if they were expecting us, for there was only one Guardian, and they hardly played at the swords before falling."

"That is because they know that we *are* the future of this world; we are the rising power. Those who oppose us, or get in our way, shall meet their demise. Why should they lose hundred or thousands of lives when there is no need?"

The Dark Lords' words hardly let Calsir's suspicions ease. Something about the battle didn't seem to fall into place. It was as if the battle was forfeited. But still, he hesitated before speaking. A piece of the puzzle lost to oblivion.

"What now, my lord?"

"Now comes the next phase of our plans." There was something hinting excitement in the Dark Lords voice, and his malicious grin returned. "You are to await the queen's heir to the throne, her first born child, and when they are born, take them to a desolate village, where you can take up a living as a peasant or farmer or a traveling merchant... But do not bring them to me until they have come of age, and can help our cause."

Calsir obliged—his hopes of remaining in the Black Tower gone. The Dark Lord then took leave of his faithful servant, and stalked away. It was only a moment after when Calsir embraced Vai'tar and extinguished the fire. Then he retired to his quarters.

This was not an end, for there are no ends in the turning of time. What once was, still remains, only remembered through legends until they are lost. Not an ending. What once was may yet come forth again, for every age has a new beginning. This was a *new* beginning.

DARKNESS TO LIGHT

Kim Benham

Darkness to Light
We come with nothing
a clean slate
Innocent to the world's disdain

We learn as we grow
Life can be cruel
It's easy to get lost
If you lack the knowledge
to fight the pain.

If we are wise
We will embrace life
Seize every chance
Breathe every sunset

When will our time end?
No one knows
We leave with nothing
Darkness to light

THE GRIM REAPER

Kim Benham

His shadow dances in the light.
Brazenly mocking; he thinks he's clever.
He won't get me. I'll put up a fight.

Naive he is to stay in my sight.
Taunting me, yes, but charming me never.
His shadow dances in the light.

Tricks he does play with the light.
I blink but his image I cannot sever.
We won't get me. I'll put up a fight.

Sneakily he tries to blend with the white.
Secretly hiding his true endeavor.
His shadow dances in the light.

Now I must muster up all my might.
To banish his unseemly sight forever.
He won't get me. I'll put a fight.

Cautious I am of his evil plight.
Knowing in moments he could flip the lever.
His shadow dances in the light.
He won't get me. I'll put up a fight.

ORDINARY SUMMER DAY

Kim Benham

It was just another ordinary summer day. At work I was procrastinating. A dozen jobs started. A dozen jobs unfinished. Life didn't seem to have much meaning. Just monotony and tiresome tasks. If asked a question of importance it's always the same answer. I don't care. No opinion because it's easier to avoid a decision than live with the consequences. I like being numb. I'm comfortable there. Twenty one years and I'd really never known loss.

When I heard the news my legs were like feathers. My chest got tight. She was gone. Twenty one years of passion and life gone.

We used to be in separable. She was my opposite. She cared about everything. It was her way or the highway. She was a perfectionist. That's why it was so hard to believe. She was the most popular girl all through school. She got straight A's all the way thru high school. She went to college on basketball scholarship and received an award in Boston Garden. Had a new baby girl she adored.

Drug overdose. That didn't make any sense. When we grew up she was afraid to litter. I was always the wild one and she would set me straight. She could tell me anything. Then I moved away. At her funeral old acquaintances told me she took it hard when I moved away. She could never open up to anyone else her deepest secrets. On the outside her life perfect but on the inside she was fighting a battle. She had a disease. It was an eating disorder. Why didn't I know that. I lost Jen twice. I lost her when I moved away and I carry that guilt with me always. I lost her that night when she was with strangers. I let her down but now I take with me a little of her spark. I try harder and I care.

Her funeral had a huge turnout. There were at least two

rows of young men crying. She was buried on the most beautiful day I can remember. That was just like her to leave this world in perfection.

MOURNING

Kim Benham

Like the eagle you are always searching
For answers that don't exist.
The sky seems cruel
You wonder if there's a heaven

You walk along lost and numb
Staring at the dog like he holds the answer.
Daily tasks are impossible
Sleeping forever sounds alluring

You search your soul for wisdom
To help you mend your heart
Life is like an illusion
Try too hard to understand it
And it loses its charm.

INSIGHT

Jeremey LeBlanc

Alone in the corner I sit as I watch a man come in and make a crude remark about the service. I sip my latte as I watch a young woman join the line and scold her child about patience, as she looks at her watch while tapping her feet. A few people stare and wonder about me while I watch the counter help try and speak to a customer, their tongues too tied to understand. I sip the liquefied sugar from the bottom of my cup as I watch an angry man flaunt his designer suit and loaded wallet, then act like a saint when he drops eleven cents into a cup with **TIPS** written on it. I laugh as I watch the ignorance unfold before me. To see how hypocritical society has become when time is slim and they need their caffeine.

LABRYNTH

Jeremey LeBlanc

Alone in the world
A child cries
Lost
Within a labyrinth of lies
Afraid and confused
He begins to wander

Before he realizes
He's a child no longer
Now a young man
Desperate for escape
He drops in submission
He's sealed his fate
Ready to give up
A voice whispers from within
It's his mother's voice
Echoing
Never give in

He's on his feet
Charging down the hall
Always seeking more
Now he has nothing at all
Old and withered
He has lost his faith
Thinking and analyzing his life
He realizes his mistakes

He spent his life
Acquiring wealth and fame

It was only then
That he realized the
Monster he became

Once again
He's alone in the world
Still lost
In that
Labyrinth
Of lies

KNOCK KNOCK

Andrew Mello

knock knock

What is this tapping
I hear at my door?
So rhythmic like,
I can't ignore.

knock knock

Is it a lover
come to fetch me,
or a murderer
on a killing spree?

knock knock

A salesman
going door to door,
or a Mormon
being ignored, ignored?

knock knock

A repair man
come to fix my sink,
or the pizza
I forgot I ordered amidst my drink?

knock knock

I hope it's a vampire

come to convert me.
I wouldn't complain,
I wouldn't flee.

knock knock

Time is wearing thin
I better reply,
before this mystery guest
says good-bye.

I get up and open the door
only to see,
nothing starrng back at me.
Discouraged I fall back in bed,
waiting for some excitement
to enter my head.

THE MOISTURE OF AGING SHEEP

Andrew Mello

Monitors are off
and the children are in bed.
The parents are awake
with possibilities of tomorrow
scraping through their head.
Is how much you care
dependent on your age?
With the loss of innocence
you become trapped in a cage.

Does knowing the boundaries
prevent our freedom?
The drying imagination
constricted by the system.
They cut the funding for art
so we can be trapped in our box.
Just like the others,
Herding sheep in a flock.

If this is how it is,
I want to lead my own herd.
Scattering my right brain
all over this world.
Consistently changing
Like the moisture in the sky.
I hope I don't dry up
Because if I do
I think I'll die.

WASTELAND

Andrew Mello

I'm wasting time on this earth
Cause I consider time a waste,
Wasting the paper I write on
While wasting ink from my pen,
I'm wasting the world away
Just like everyone else
Lacking a definable future,
A Populous with out a cap
The earths a tree
And were sucking the sap.

Time will stretch a body out
rooting morals in the ground,
the young want age
while the old fight it off
Wondering where it all went,
wasting away with out context
Age wears our cerebral cortex,
Obliterating thoughts you held
Consciousness escapes
this case where I once dwelled.

The cycle begins
Providing the earth
Renewing the soil,
With festering skin
Limb, by limb, by limb,
And in this end
A human life should be equal
To the amount it spends
But we humans
We waste more than we intend
So much so, we can't comprehend.

WARTIME BLUES

Andrew Mello

A barrel holds a secret,
floating down the stream.
A war torn city,
explosions in the streets.
Blinding lights scorch the retinas
of the curious children.
As a brilliant tactician
misses his target,
women scream out,
only to be silenced.

Like a metronome
the boots hit the pavement.
Torching up houses,
because of selfish orders.
Destroying tradition,
without a thought.
Back home they're heroes,
but here they're not.

Still, silently I wait
holding in my secret.
Praying to god
they don't see me,
though I never prayed in my life.
Floating in a barrel,
on this war time blues.
The only way I can deal
is the only way I choose.

SANCTUARY

Heather DeLeon

As I step off the plane, and I breathe in the warm tropical air, the knots in my shoulders begin to unwind. I feel my senses that have been in hibernation since November beginning to re-emerge. The heat washes over me in a welcoming embrace. I am here in Puerto Rico once again. I plop myself down on the nearest bench, dig out my flip-flops, and I am officially on vacation! After gathering my bags, I get into my rental car. No AC for me, I came here to sweat. With the windows rolled down, the breeze playfully tosses my hair around. I tune the radio to a station playing salsa and immerse myself in the rhythm of the islands. I have waited all year for this, and I begin to anticipate all the fun things I will do.

The palms at Luquillo Beach are beckoning me with their swooshing fronds. The memory of delicious native treats are teasing my taste buds, making my mouth water. But, first, El Yunque is waiting for me to climb its trails. I can't wait to get started!

The next morning I set out early. I am on my way to the rain forest, and I want to begin my journey before it gets too hot. I stand looking up at El Yunque, and can barely see the top, for it is shrouded in mist. Driving up the steep, winding road, I quickly become enveloped in layer upon layer of luscious green foliage. Bamboo stalks rub together as they sway back and forth in the gentle morning breeze. Giant palm leaves swoop down, gently brushing the top of the car as if to say "Buenos Dias". Further up the road, the steep slopes of the mountain bow down to welcome me. Thousands of wild impatiens tumble down the hills to greet me in an explosion of pinks and whites. They seem happy to be there as am I. I become aware of the sound of water, and as I round the bend, I see a small waterfall cascading down between fallen rocks. I pull over to get a better look. Out in the sunshine, I get the full effect. I take in a breath of air that is constantly being renewed by the cleansing rains. I am now high enough to get an

amazing view of the valley below. It seems to go on forever. Way, way down, I see my next destination. It is the amazing turquoise ocean. But, first I want to work up a sweat.

Back in the car, I proceed to the trail I want to hike. It's not a very long hike, but it is intense. The reward at the end is worth every single step. Starting out, I wind my way downhill. Twenty steps in; I am enclosed in foliage so thick that I cannot see where I started from just a minute ago. It's as if the jungle has swallowed me whole. Enjoying this feeling of solitude, I am captivated by what's going on around me. Brown and green Gecko lizards scamper up trees as I pass. Green parrots are calling to each other and their squawks fill the air. Tiny native birds dart in and out of the treetops, chasing each other gleefully. I continue on this way, down the rickety trail with its moss-covered rocks, and I am really sweating now.

Almost subconsciously, I become aware of a faint roar. At first, it blends into the background, but as I continue my trek, the intensity of this roar increases. My heart begins to beat a little faster, and I forget about my discomfort caused by the oppressive humidity. Relief is drawing near. What started out as faint has become the only sound I can hear. I have reached my reward.

In front of me, water is booming down. Hitting the rocks and gushing into the pool below, cool mist is spritzing me from a distance of twenty feet. Immediately, I remove my socks and sneakers. I must dip my toes into this refreshing oasis. I make my way carefully down the slippery rocks. Gingerly, I place my bare foot onto the rocky floor of the pool. It feels like a melted glacier. As I step in further, the water turns to tiny needles that jab themselves into my flesh. Before I can even get in up to my knees, I must turn back. Getting out, I find a place to sit on a rock facing the falls, and take a few moments to reflect and soak up its majesty.

Feeling refreshed and invigorated, I put my shoes back on, and, with a smile on my face, begin the hike back to civilization. Even though I am passing the exact same scenery as on my way down, the beauty is in no way diminished. I will carry this memory with me to keep me warm in the cold New England winter.

FOR ALWAYS

Heidi Gott

I would have loved you for always
with your once loving hands
and your easy laughter.
So long ago, it captured my heart.

On this night, watching snow fall softly
down, quietly, effortlessly--
If only love were as simple.

The chill in the air, in your heart,
how careless you think of me...
to know, at one time
I would have loved you for always.

THE FLY

Heidi Gott

Fly buzzing around, to and fro.
Just waiting, searching
for its pot of gold.
With large lidless eyes...
Target--the prize!!
Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!
The Speeding Fly...Racing like a bullet...
Then suddenly...
SPLAT!!!!!!!
Against the windshield.
The fly is gone
before he can claim
his big fish...the prize!

ACCUSED

Heidi Gott

I, the accused, stand charged
 of the following crimes:
Selfishness, greed,
Unfaithfulness, and lies.
Secrets kept, with truth
 and honesty swept under the rug...
The charges include—
“Being thankless, ungrateful,
Hurtful and unkind—A ruthless sort.”
To My Accuser—This is my reply...
Have you looked at yourself with the same critical eyes?

EMBERS TO STARS

Lindsey Reneé Lacombe

Empty courtyard, black stones set in high impregnable walls. Double-doors, thick oak laced in gold metalwork. Unconscious figure, huddled in a lone, dusty corner. Hair black as the night barely kept at bay, clinging to her perspiring face. Body asleep, yet eyes wide open. Old, torn tunic, long ago white.

A horn blows in the distance: a signal. The young woman in the corner stirs, the vacancy in her eyes is gone. She is afraid, but she doesn't know why. She stands weakly and looks to the fathomless sky, far above the looming towers the stars still shine. She shifts her weight and hears the clanking of metal against metal...and she remembers...

Blood—she had scrubbed until her hands were raw, but she could not rid her hands of the incriminating stain. She is glad now that it is dark, for she cannot bear to see that which convicts her. The nightmarish memories of the last feeble cries for help; the recollection of the exact moment the life was vanquished turns her stomach and she vomits in the dust.

It was not long after she had smothered the embers of that life that she was brought into custody. She had planned to run away, yet she couldn't move her feet from the spot. In the moonlight, reflections had made her nearly mad with regret, the taunting recollection of what her destiny was intended to be before she desecrated herself beyond returning. While the blood on her hands still emitted steamy warmth, she had been hypnotized by the silver light dancing on the corpse; conjuring up memories of her childhood. When she was a little girl it had been her habit to wait patiently in her trundle bed picking out the shadow animals on the thatched roof. A lion with a monkey on its back, a rabbit—until her father came to tuck her in. Kneeling on the floor beside her he would say "Someday you will live in the palace like the Royal Court. You wouldn't leave your old Pa alone with your Ma

would you?" He would kiss her cheek, and look over his shoulder to see his wife smiling at the threshold. They were so proud to have a daughter who had been chosen by the King to serve in his court when she was old enough. The King had selected her especially. Most nights, she dreamt of meeting him, but never had she imagined it would be like this...

The large doors swing open; a herald calls out, "Guilty, step forward." She is led into a dazzling hall of intricately carved wood and stone, the carpet is a rich purple with golden galaxies spiraling along the perimeter. The ceiling is high and painted in the colors of sunset, and gradually as the hall progresses, its colors bow out into purple night. The hall goes on and on and finally leads into an expansive throne room. Along both walls are a line of guards wearing armor so well polished, the reflection of their comrades could be clearly seen. Each have their right hand on the hilt of golden swords.

She is breathless with the wonder of all that surrounds her and she hardly notices when her escort stops walking. It is not long before she feels light warming her skin, but there are no lights anywhere except a golden glow coming from directly ahead. At the moment that she discovers the source of the light, she falls on her face, for the light seems to be pouring from the throne of the King.

The King is raised on a dais, clothed in such things as define royalty. His throne is built of precious gems and rare stones. The King himself is a Man among men, a hero of old tales, spoken of only in legends and epic poems. She is in awe of him and would be thrilled—except for the blood on her hands. Shame like a putrid, black tidal wave washes over her and she wishes that she could drown in it. She can't look at him anymore; she kneels before the King, worthy only of death.

A voice suddenly shatters the silence in the throne room. It is a harsh voice, heavy with condemnation and scorn. She looks around for the owner of the voice and sees a man, standing at the foot of the throne. He is pointing at her, his name is Accuser.

"Your Highness, this wretch—"

"What is her name?" the King interjects.

Looking upon the girl in rags, love and deep sadness bursts forth in his heart. Oh how he loves her! But—

"Her name is Guilty, Your Highness."

"Guilty?" she thinks, "No that's not my name, it's...it's..." but she can't remember.

"—This woman has killed an innocent. As you know the penalty for the slaughter of innocence is death. A life for a life."

The King knows this, "Yes. It is evident that she is at fault. Does the condemned have any last requests?"

The softness of his voice reverberates within her, a strange urgency grips her heart like hot tongs. Guilty knows she has done wrong and she will not evade punishment, yet she knows she doesn't want to die without speaking with the King, just the two of them. Of course he will never forgive her, but she wants him to understand...to know how much she loves him.

"I want to speak with the King!" The sound of her voice is jagged and condemning in her own ears.

The Accuser looks shocked and disgusted; the King is shocked too, but in surprise rather than disgust. After a pause, the King beckons the Accuser to come forward to discuss the matter.

"Of course the request is impossible—she has blood on her hands! The Law is perfectly clear: she must die immediately."

"Yes. I know, but no one has ever asked to speak with me before."

"She has blood on her hands! A life for a life."

The King shakes his head as though from a dream, "A life for a life...take her outside."

Accuser jerks Guilty up by her elbow. She is saddened by the King's response, but she is not angry or surprised, for she knows she deserves it.

Accuser leads the girl into a large courtyard. Four torches align every wall. A pile of wood is stacked neatly in a corner and a clay jar sits next to it. In the center is a platform with stairs on one side and a large pole in the middle with a metal ring on it.

He is behind her, pushing her with one hand as she walks. At the stairs, she trips over the dangling chains and falls, hitting her head on the step. Accuser kicks her in the stomach for her clumsiness; hate and disgust chiseled into his face. She scrambles to get up. Fear chokes her, but she knows she is getting what she earned. He laughs scornfully and she hurries up onto the platform, afraid of being struck again.

Accuser forces her to stand with her back pressed against the pole and he clasps the chains to the thick metal ring.

Locked now into place she looks into the sky at the familiar stars for comfort, the only thing that has been constant in her life...besides the King. Accuser begins to get wood, to pile under and around the stake, when a wicked idea occurs to him. He takes the jar and again climbs the stairs.

"Do you know what this is? It's pitch, to pour onto the wood, so it will burn quicker and hopefully for your sake, smoke more." He holds it up to her line of vision and looks at it, "If you ask me, I think it would be much more efficient to skip the wood part. Seems like an unholy waste of money, just so you can inhale smoke and die the easy way."

Accuser pours the pitch over her head; it slowly trickles down her face, covering her eyes; seeping into her ears. He then pours the sluggish fluid over her shoulders; it stiffens her clothes and clings tightly to her flesh.

When he is satisfied, he jumps down from the platform and gets a torch off the wall. He walks slowly back—he can't wait to hear her scream. Accuser mounts the steps—torch poised—he is unsure if he wants to finish it quickly or drag it out and savor it.

Guilty labors to keep her breathing regular but she is so afraid that it comes shallow and tremulous. Tears betray any reserved strength in her and if it weren't for the chain her knees would buckle.

Accuser, knowledgeable in death, sees all this. "Oh stop it you wench. You're lucky I'm not a Roman or I'd have nailed you to the stake."

At that moment when the flame would meet her skin the double doors swing open and slam against the wall. A furious King strides in and shouts gutturally at the horrendous sight before him. He jumps onto the platform and snatches away the flame, throwing it angrily on the ground.

Relief and renewed shame flicker across Guilty's face. The King looks at her reassuringly, he proceeds to unlock her from the stake and in her weakness, she collapses.

"Accuser, you have undone yourself," he says with much repulsion in his voice.

The King bends down and takes both of Guilty's hands in his and pulls her gently to her feet. The Accuser gasps in shock.

With her hands in his, he looks into her eyes so intensely she feels him knowing her, knowing everything. In the depth of

his eyes, she sees love, compassion...and mercy. Mercy! Looking down, overcome with sheer wonderment she inhales sharply as she sees that... "The blood! The blood is gone!"

Emotion is thick in the voice of the King as he says, "I give you a new name. You shall no longer be called Guilty...but Beloved."

It is then she notices his hands—covered in blood.

"My kingdom is yours...forever."

The Accuser watches all this with growing happiness—he knows the law. He mounts the stairs and touches the King on the shoulder to lead him to the stake, but he brushes him off.

"No, I do this of my own will. There is no need that chains should hold me."

With that, he takes the jug and pours the remainder of the pitch over his body. He steps to the stake and grips the ring in his hands.

Beloved weeps on the ground, darkening the dirt with her tears.

Before Accuser sets flame to his saturated robe, the King looks at her and says, "I love you my Beloved."

The King does not cry out as the searing heat consumes his flesh. He sings to her songs of love from the dancing flames. It isn't long before he can do so no longer. The flame flickers brighter for a moment and he gives up his life. At that moment, Beloved sees a dove fly out from the midst of the flames and upward into the stars.

The perfect King dies for a murderer.



AnnMarie Ferguson

THE BURNING KNIGHTS

Scott Gallant

MONDAY

It begins with a quick burst of magnesium light followed by a deafening, unfamiliar roar an unbearably hot wind carries a noxious chemical smell from the infernal machine soars the stygian angels with black-ashed wings.

Boom!!!

Hell shows an unmerciful appetite for eight years worth of your time and energy; she gnaws away at the merchandise faster than you can feel the bomb's heat blistering the skin on your face or inhale that sickly singed hair odor.

The shock softens the world around you to a hazy, mock tranquility; your only chance for survival is to resist denial's comfort and leave all your worldly possessions to the flame. Adrenaline overcomes the dopamine as muscles engage with lightning speed... RUN!

Amidst the pandemonium, muffled chants of "Allahu akbar!!" revealed the source of wrath that engulfed your tiny camera store in a purifying blaze. You instinctively rush to the front entrance when menacing silhouettes wielding swords-from-plowshares reverse your direction towards the back door. A machete is swung from your left flank; you embrace the blow with your hand to save your vitals. All that remains of your smallest finger dangles loosely from a slab of skin and ligament as you push for escape without even the time to acknowledge the pain, accompanied by the everflow of crimson down the length of your arm.

How I managed to elude death that day MUST be attributed to Divine Providence. God wills it.

Suddenly, the scenario has changed...

Staring from wild and familiar amber-colored eyes, bellows a woman in anguished fury: "I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you!!!"

She claws away at the cross which hangs from your neck as if this little silver trinket had murdered her husband--as if you were already dead. Your children are nowhere to be seen...

beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep

A relentless and repetitious screech jarred a slender, dark-skinned man from his terrible sleep. The alarm was killed and the time confirmed: half-past five in the morning. He sat up over the edge of his bed. He stared straight ahead into his reflection from across the room. Faded patches of gray in his hair and the gravity settling into his chest marked the years of a man who's experienced one half a century.

The recurring memory from six years ago still invaded his rest from time to time, though much less frequent in recent months... just no less intense. No matter to him. He knew the futility of allowing the terror to take over; he had much to recover from his loss in Pakistan, and the resources were increasingly available to him with each passing day in America.

Stay focused and remain sharp... the man disciplined himself.

"Aslam?..." came a sleepy voice from the other side of the queen-sized bed. There, lay a Caucasian, middle-aged woman dressed in a plain, oversized t-shirt. "Could you set the alarm for nine, please?"

"Yes love," replied Aslam. He proceeded with his early morning promise, took a deep breath then stood.

It was time to prepare for work.

6:54 AM

Outside the doorway of a large factory, cigarette in hand, stood a tall and headstrong man with relaxed sandy-colored hair. The morning air made it difficult to distinguish the heat vapor from smoke with each exhalation. Five minutes before the punch-

clock hour allowed for a little nicotine and a final peace of mind before the hours of concentrated effort to synchronize himself with the unyielding repetition of his mindless master machine.

A behemoth of a pick-up pulled into the parking lot, bearing the adornments of an ever-so proud American conflicted with a philosophy of Libertarian Individualism and the contradictory sense of unwavering compliance to his Commander-in-Chief: American flags, yellow ribbons, an NRA membership sticker, an iconographic image of Osama Bin Ladan within dead sight of a sniper scope, a grave warning against flag burning strategically placed by his gun rack, a prominent "W" bearing religious overtones, his undying faith in the future prospects of the BoSox ironically placed next to the confederate flag so new and foreign to his New England homeland setting. The Dixieland banner drew a venomous whisper, "yankneck fuck" from underneath Patrick's breath, the idling bystander with his cigarette.

Emerging from his modernized steed was a muscular, blue-collared warrior dressed in his faded blue denim uniform, with eyes toward Patrick and a sarcastic look of surprise on his face. He then proceeded to the entrance with a formulated greeting:

"So, where's your favorite sandnigger this morning? He's usually out here, holding your hand before shift."

Patrick subsided the bile-inducing urge to bellow out, "Hey Darrel, why don't you go home and fuck your mother some more, you hick, inbred cro-mag!!!" but decided upon a more subtle response by pretending to search in various directions, shrugging his shoulders in resignation then replying, "I don't know. Perhaps he's up your ass." With no drum roll to accompany the punch line, he settled for another drag from his cigarette.

Darrel snapped his head forward to only an inch from Patrick's face in hopes of eliciting a flinching retraction. Patrick remained solid and stone-faced, though not quite brave enough to meet Darrel's gaze head-on.

"You're hilarious," scoffed Darrel, then continued past to relieve the nightshift waiting inside.

Another vehicle pulled in shortly after the verbal skirmish; a polished, black Lincoln Town Car with Aslam behind the wheel gesturing a friendly wave towards Patrick, who smirked and nodded back in recognition. As Aslam approached the doorway

with Patrick standing beside it, Patrick stamped out the burning filter with the heel of his work boot and welcomed him with small talk.

“So, you think the Red Sox will make it this year?” asked Patrick.

Aslam cheered in broken English, “If play like yesterday... rest of week... very good chance. Go Sox!!”

By noontime, lunch break was welcomed with relief from an entire workforce still recovering from their weekend sabbatical. The break room was filled with several of the more veteran employees sitting in their claimed seating, as awarded by seniority. The topic of discussion was catalyzed by a loud reading from today's newspaper about an armored personnel carrier detonating a roadside IED, killing six American soldiers.

“We gotta pull outa there,” exclaimed one. “There's no sense in staying; It's their mess, no longer our business. We've got good boys dying in that sand trap... and for what?”

Another contributed his two-cents worth, “Oil.”

“We haven't found the WMD's yet. You wanna leave 'em for the terrorists?” cried out a third.

“They're up George Bush's ass!!!” the first quipped back with smiting emphasis.

Patrick passed by the table, heading towards the fridge for his brown-bagged meal, only to be stalled by an inquiry, “Hey Patrick, you're a smart guy. What do you think should be done with this whole fucking mess?”

Patrick let out an exasperated sigh, revealing befuddled frustration as he carefully voiced his wisdom, potentially agreeable to both sides, “I believe Colin Powell said it best when he warned Bush before his declaration of war: You break it, you bought it.”

“...None of this shit about Americans dying in Iraq would be happening if we'd just dropped the fuckin' A-bomb on September 12th.” retaliated Darrel with his usual “It's as easy as black-n-white” philosophy, while his back was turned towards the huddled debate, pouring himself a coffee.

Resisting the temptation to mindlessly lash out in anger, Patrick instead decided to amuse Darrel with a little insight, “Correct!! No dead Americans in Iraq then... Dead Americans all over America due to fallout, but at least we'll cut costs in travel expenses. I believe the Republicans call that fiscal responsibility.”

Darrel's only comeback was calling Patrick a pussy as he proceeded to his seat while stirring his admixture of roasted bean and non-dairy creamer. Patrick decided against letting the shit-sliding end with his rival's vulgar slang.

"So, Darrel..." began Patrick before being interrupted with a "Blow me," then continued as if not hearing Darrel's less-than-congenial call for silence and lone time. "If you had been president... *God help us...* your solution to nine-eleven would've been a nu-ku-lar drop on Baghdad?"

Patrick paused to await Darrel's reply. Nothing. Not even a glance in his direction. "I thought Afghanistan was harboring Bin Laden?"

"Bomb 'em all!!" Darrel asserted just before taking a swig of his hot water beverage.

Patrick had to pause in shock and contemplate what kind of catastrophic expense such drastic measures would have on the biosphere, let alone humanity in general. The truth has been exposed without interference from politically-corrected silence; man's destiny, as fragile as it already was, now hangs off a pitiful edge because, for many, pride's a stronger motivation than reason. Uninterested in complicated remedies, a lack of time is commonly invoked as the reason for reactive politics. Yet ironically, the results from poor planning tend to require much, much longer periods of recovery... if at all possible.

"You're serious?" Patrick asked with disbelief.

A loud "Yup!!" thundered past Darrel's lips this time, but still withholding an eyeball. His hostile undertone triggered a volley of remarks ricocheting from one side of the room to the next, as every by-stander within the break room became enthralled in the vocal Wimbledon match.

Patrick: "So everyone must die, is that it?"

Darrel: "Every towel head. Send every pagan to their fifty-something virgins."

Patrick: "Pagan... So your calls for genocide are religiously motivated? All this time I just dismissed you as a racist."

Darrel: "What the fuck would you know about religion, Mr. Pinko Atheist."

Patrick: "I never said I was an Atheist, I only told you I never bother with church."

Darrel: "What's the difference?"

That last question struck a nerve in Patrick; it essentially translated to a choice of either parroting a single denomination's perspective or burning in Hell. If anything pissed him off, it was the unwavering conviction of faith. It seemed absolutely arrogant to assume you had everything figured out, as if you had a direct phone line to the big man himself and he confided in you on a daily basis. Compound that with the fact that every religion on the planet that boasts this kind of special privilege seems to generate its own form of miracle. That, or God himself has a major split-personality disorder.

"The difference is that I'd like to formulate my own assessment of morality rather than swallow someone else's thoughtlessly. For instance, because I feel no responsibility to any one church authority, I'm now free to ask if Jesus would condone your stance to immolate millions of innocent women and children by Oppenheimer's invention, without risk of excommunication."

Darrel seemed a little confused with Patrick's last statement. Nonetheless, he assumed Patrick was just being a smart-ass anyway. Patrick paraphrased to a simple question:

"Do YOU think Jesus would agree to killing innocent children for whatever cause?"

"Fuck 'em," hissed Darrel. "Don't hand me this innocent shit! My cousin is serving his third tour in Iraq and he's told me stories of the little bastards throwing rocks at convoys!"

"Rocks..." One word was Patrick's only reply. Yet it somehow effectively demanded to know how rock-throwing could warrant a mushroom cloud.

"In ten years, they'll be grenades. I see nothin' but future insurgents." answers Darrel.

"If we're still there in ten years, whose fault would that be?" Inquired Patrick with a precisioned dig towards the integrity of his political heroes. Knowing Patrick's intent, Darrel calmly stood up from his chair, finished his last gulp of fuel, tossed the empty Styrofoam cup into a nearby waste barrel, and with a devilish smirk blurted out a name so guaranteed to rustle Patrick's feathers: "Clinton."

It worked. Patrick was quite flustered, but should have expected the response.

Everything is Clinton's fault to a Right Winger... hailstorms, hang-nails, hot flashes... thought Patrick.

He decided to hold his tongue on account of futility; neither side would ever concede to the other's position. Besides, break time was almost over and he hadn't even touched his lunch yet. Then again, Patrick wondered if this conversation should be formally concluded...

"I hope one day you'll come to realize that there are many different religions and cultures that comprise the Middle East," lectured Patrick. "Opinions there are as diverse as you'd find here in the United States... even in this room."

"...Which wouldn't be a bother if we weeded out the traitors!" finished Darrel as he made a grand exit back to his mechanical responsibility.

The spurn ran a deadly, cold chill down Patrick's spine then straight into his heart. Patrick surmised what possible consequences may rise from today's UberPatriotism and made a silent vow to resist its terrible manifestations: Alien and Sedition and Espionage Acts, internment camps, un-american witch trials, conscription for preemptive wars, closing the borders, military tribunals without defense lawyers, imprisonment in undisclosed locations, suspects tortured into false confessions, COINTELPRO, H.R. 6166, and whatever else which justifies hubris for some over liberty for all. Perhaps such resistance will, one day, require the ultimate sacrifice. Perhaps Patrick will transcend the fear and accept the honor. Perhaps.

TUESDAY

An unusually warm day for the declining season. Every worker had stripped away their hibernating gear to a minimal t-shirt as their faces filled with rambunctious nostalgia for the warmer Solstice. A day, if nothing more, is well appreciated here to bid a final farewell to Summer's end.

The dust and dirt were once again swept from the seating of the outdoor picnic benches congregated around the isolated maple tree, one hundred years proud but half-asleep in tufts of brown and sickly orange. Lunch break will commence outdoors for most of those grinding away during the day shift.

Patrick unconventionally sat upon the picnic table top with an open book in lap and a half-eaten turkey-and-Swiss, garnished

with four kinds of green and yellowish Dijon spread, by his right side. As Lao Tzu timelessly forewarned that armies, so unyielding and mighty, will soon enough reflect the stiffness found in death, in 10-font, Times New Roman, Patrick's devoted attention upon one thousand-year wisdoms shattered like crystal to an all-too-familiar reverberated pitch, none-so-much operatic.

"What is this?... Two days in a row you're eating alone?" inquired Darrel with sarcastic lashings from his cat-o-nine tongue. "Level with me now, am I witnessing a lover's quarrel?"

Patrick felt the disgusting admixture of a homophobe's ramblings in his left ear canal and a partially digested deli sandwich in his stomach. "Leveling with you, Darrel, would require much descent on my part... I believe 'devolution' is the proper term."

Knowing that Darrel would not be satisfied with a "fuck yourself" sort of reply, Patrick continued, if for no other reason, to spare his ear drums. "If you were referring to Aslam with your oh-so-funny gay innuendo, he'll be here in a few minutes; he's just a little caught up with something. Not sure why you'd care anyways."

"Hey, I just figured since you two spend so much break time together... you know." Darrel feigned to wash his hands of what he ironically instigated through unwelcome speculation.

In return, Patrick matched Darrel's smartass remark with an equally farcical confession. "Yes, Darrel, you saw right through our facade; we both hang out at leather boy clubs after work. What tipped you off then? Was it that we both had more to talk about than sports and pussy?"

"Hey, you cannot be an open supporter of gay marriage and then act all offended when I question your supposed straightness." Darrel appeared quite pleased with his own brand of deduction-through-passive-aggressive inquisition.

"You can't be fucking serious..." blurted Patrick as he rolled his eyes upward. Patrick began to lose his cool to the throes of indignation. "You know, I can't quite follow your logic. Are you insinuating that I must suck dick 'cause I understand that one's choice in committed partnership is no one else's fucking business?"

Darrel was quick on his feet to readily dance with the Devil's advocate. "What about bestiality?"

"What about it?" replied Patrick defensively to what he deemed faulty logic. "I thought this argument was about consenting human adults?"

"Would you allow a man to marry his horse?" Darrel persisted. "That would be the next Hollywood crusade if we give in to the queers."

"Well golly gee, Darrel!!" Patrick transformed his demeanor to one so eloquent with patronizing rhetoric. "Do horses work and pay taxes? Does a horse serve his country overseas?"

"Jesus Christ, here we go again with that 'fags in the military' bullshit!!... Mr. 'don't ask, don't tell' over here!!" Darrel snapped back. "You'd like to think that every man in uniform is an ass-banger, wouldn't you?"

"There are probably a lot more than you'd care to admit," Patrick dead-panned.

"The Navy doesn't count, pinky-dick," Darrel corrected. "You actually think a tinkerbelle could hack the corps?"

"You mean, the part where an entire company of men sleep and shower together?" Patrick sensed the pride in Darrel's "Semper Fi" and delightfully trampled on it with no quarter.

"Combat, you asshole!" whelped Darrel like a wounded dog of war. "A man can't think about killing another and smooching his pickle at the same time."

"I'm a little frightened to ask how you proved your theory, but I gotta name for you: Alexander the Great," Patrick applied with a little West Point. "Greatest military tactician in history, conquered much of the known world, and yet found time to kiss weiner, as you mentioned. Puts a hole in your theory, doesn't it?"

At this point one co-worker had enough: "For fuck's sake! Could you two just shut up about fags while I'm trying to eat here, please?"

Forsaking another word, Darrel took his cue to break out a portable DVD player, with a built-in LCD screen, from his tote bag. He was glad to end their shared lip disservice as he always felt a little intimidated with Patrick's higher education, though he'd never admit it.

Without a care or concern for consent, Darrel pressed the play command on his traveler's storyteller. The red laser within revealed the digital memory locked away in a plastic disc with one

shiny, prismatic surface, like a Rosetta Stone compiled of silicon and wire.

Two sets of soft, feminine moans and yeses, which only so slightly rose above the most mediocre melody ever composed, suddenly flooded the audible perimeter; a pair of identical air-brushed porn starlets engaged in pantomimed Sappho worship with business lips and impractical cat-claw nails. Most of the lurching bystanders exposed their curiosity with a little rubber-necking, while the remaining few who refrained from even a second glimpse were old enough to have seen it all before and too old to care any longer.

It was a world that made its own rules underneath the prying noses of authority. Anyone here would readily admit to the grave seriousness of introducing pornographic material into the workplace; immediate termination would be the most lenient of awaited punishments. But who here would risk their manhood to snitch for entertainment they already enjoy at home when the wife was out and about anyway? There exists an underlying, unwritten clause in the ever-clear sexual harassment policy, understood but never spoken amongst XY genotypes: no woman present, no offense made.

Patrick was never one to boast sexual prudence outside the isolated golden rule of Consent, but he was never one impressed with fugazied orgasms either. And so he sat, reading his book... but not for long. As much as Patrick would love to ignore Darrel forever after, there's always something... something he said, something he does... something that grates on his nerves which cannot be left alone without comment.

"So, let me get this straight..." interjected Patrick. "Gay marriage is morally wrong, but watching Candy and Bambi give each other tongue baths is just A-O-K, according to your church?"

"Do you see rings on their fingers?" Darrel retorted.

Somehow as always, conversations between the ass and elephant naturally flow toward the same dogmatic, jagged rocks: abortion, right to arms, capital punishment, freedom of the church versus freedom from the church, and in this case gay marriage, once again.

"So that's your whole argument? Rings and I do's?" Patrick persisted.

"God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve," Darrel lectured in return.

"Well, technically, God made everything... including man's penchant for convenient hypocrisy. I'm done with this." Patrick finished his point with a bookmarked page and a long, standing stretch, rearing to depart.

"Patrick, it's pretty simple," Darrel said, determined to get the last word in. "Repeat after me if you wish... Girls are hot, guys are not. You're obviously either confused or in denial. But whatever your problem is, keep it to yourself or blow me."

"Blow you... and you call me latent," Patrick stated with equal bravado to deny Darrel his conquest of conclusion as he proceeded towards the factory entrance.

On his way, Patrick saw Aslam leaving the very archway en route to the picnic tables. Aslam smiled as he stopped to inquire where Patrick was going so early, before break time was over.

"Darrel's over there," Patrick asserted as if no further explanation was necessary. According to Aslam, it was the best reason.

"He's showing everybody a skin flick on his DVD player, if you're interested," Patrick chided, as though not directed towards his audience.

Aslam was a little confused. "Skin flick?" he asked.

"Porn," Patrick explained, then changed the subject. "I'm going in the break room if you'd like to join me."

Without a reply, Aslam followed Patrick inside.

Aside from obviously preferring Patrick's company to Darrel's torments, he was a little embarrassed with the idea of public nudity, let alone sexual exhibitionism. He felt it would dishonor his wife to heed the lascivious teases of another woman and so his choice was made without a second thought. However, out of shock, Aslam inquired further for confirmation that he understood the definition of "Porn."

"Darrel showing movie... man and woman having sex?" Aslam asked.

"Technically, no." Patrick answered. "Two women."

"Two... women?!" started Aslam, who then revealed what degree of sexual repression his homeland had religiously enforced, with one word asked: "How?"

WEDNESDAY

As Aslam pulled into his usual parking space with the punctuality one would expect from model citizenship, quite suddenly he was taken aback by a makeshift road sign that read, "ASLIM'S CAMEL PARKING."

Even the discourtesy of misspelling my name.... thought Aslam.

Aslam could have easily guessed who was behind this "little gag" without the confirmation from Patrick, sensing the nature of the prank as derogatory, but his explanation was much appreciated as to why Darrel would think he'd own a camel:

"Associating Arabs with camels is no different from assuming every American is a horse-riding cowboy."

"But, I'm not Arab..." Aslam politely corrected Patrick. In embarrassment, Patrick quickly apologized and asserted he meant "Middle Eastern."

Aslam shared with Patrick that much of Pakistan had been modernized; anyone who could afford a vehicle drove one as the rest simply rode a bus or train. Typically, only the shepherds residing in the more remote desert regions owned camels, and even then horses were just as abundant. Patrick nodded his head in affirmation of prior knowledge.

"As is the same here with our Mid-Western ranchers, minus the camels." supported Patrick.

"But..." concluded Aslam with his best grasp of English, "back home... we... errrrmm... many of us... look to future. Cars. Cameras. Airplanes. Televisions. Computers... good. Good for us. Shepherds are... old ways. Very poor. Desperate. Here, America... Cowboy is... uuuuum..."

"Symbol?" interjected Patrick.

"Yes..." confirmed Aslam. "Many here want to be... cowboy. Even Bush... President Bush acts like cowboy... We have Prime Minister... Shaukat Aziz... don't dress like shepherd back home."

Patrick understood the inside political irony to be a little above Aslam's head, for he had much to learn about our American culture as it was, where illusions are sometimes more revered than the ugly truth. But out of respect from the old immigrant heritage

to the new, Patrick shared a little wisdom with a hint of displaced contempt under his breath:

“Trust me. Not all Americans share his Texas Ranger sentiment.”

9:15 AM

Break time was over and both separated from conversation to return to work. Patrick second guessed his premeditated silence and decided upon a quick conversation with Darrel before completing his occupational destination. Darrel made no polite gesture that he had recognized Patrick's presence as he continued his work unabashed, instead relying on his trademark inquiry as his back was turned, “What the fuck do YOU want?”

“Keep this up and you'll probably lose your job,” Patrick stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

“What?!!” Darrel jerked his ear only inches from Patrick's mouth in a suggestion to choose his words carefully if he wished to avoid the ancient rite of calling out another male.

Patrick resisted any urge to heel to who he perceived as a preening alpha and continued with a voice of reason, “If you persist in harassing Aslam, George will not think twice to fire your ass.”

“Fuck off!!” Darrel bellowed in anger.

“You know the money's tight; the last thing George needs right now is a lawsuit to financially bury him,” Patrick remained mildly termagant.

“You telling me you're my little snitch bitch?” Darrel snapped with interrogation.

“Darrel, you displayed your intolerance on a signpost in the parking lot... in YOUR writing... so stop feigning ambiguity!!!” A slight pause indicated that Patrick's comment proved effective despite Darrel's response.

“Ya know, I'm not sure what ambi... ambigu... whatever the hell you just said means, but if you don't stop givin' me shit while I'm trying to work here, you and me will have business outside! You hearing me?” Darrel growled.

“I just want to know why you hate him so much.” Patrick stated his entire purpose with a calmer tone.

"Why do you care?!" Darrel's reply somehow indicated to Patrick his unconventional manner, for the fact is, an unspoken masculine code of "never interfere with another man's battles" has been upheld by the rest of the all-male workforce.

But Patrick wondered how Aslam was in any position to defend himself. He hardly knew the full extension of legal protection as a non-citizen, and his desire to assimilate in a culture where half its people give him no welcome might be crushed under heel from a harsh lesson enriched in American tradition; every generation perceives the new wave of immigrants as un-American to the native-born: their sole reason for job scarcity, plummeting property values, why their wives will be "raped" and their daughters will marry into broken homes. Compound that with a war and one could just as easily disappear behind barbed wire fences instead of destined dirty slums. This is the era of the "New Pearl Harbor," and Aslam looks "Jap" enough in the eyes of a reactionary.

"He does his job like the rest of us, he never causes trouble, he expects no special treatment as a minority, has yet to step on anyone's toes, so I'm trying to figure out where all this hostility is coming from."

Darrel couldn't control his reflex to look away for a brief moment; the unexpected awareness of Aslam's humanity had provoked a split second of humility, which then quickly gave way to his stoic composure to maintain his ideological principles. These principles formulated a plan to protect his nation from foreign invasion, both militarily and culturally, at whatever human cost. Despite the warnings from his leftist brethren that speak of compromising the rights of individuals for national security as being the rot that will destroy this republic from within, it all appeared to Darrel as an all-too-familiar cowardice so characterized by the socialist, which he feels is much more dangerous.

From a side-glanced distant stare came a lopsided grin and a rebounding quip, "It is BECAUSE you don't know that answer why I'll never hate him nearly as much as I hate liberal faggots like YOU!" The emphasis towards Patrick was accompanied by a jab to the sternum with Darrel's index finger.

Patrick was taken aback by Darrel's accusation. Patrick wasn't about to accept that viewpoint from a man desperately

searching to blame another for his own misguided anger. Quite the dichotomy; between them both lies a parallel of needing to uphold American values while at direct odds for what these values stand for.

“Let's just get one thing straight here,” Darrel continued. “I don't blame him for wanting to come to America, 'cause I'm sure he has it a shitload better here than back home in Buttfuckistan or wherever. This is why I'd gladly die for my country; It's the greatest nation the world has ever seen... and he knows it better than you do.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” replied Patrick defensively.

“It means punks like you don't appreciate how good you have it here!!” asserted Darrel.

“Now hold on...!!” responded Patrick.

“Don't interrupt me again!!” hollered Darrel.

Darrel had raised his voiced and was poised to move in for the kill. “Everyday, thousands of starving camel jockeys, wetbacks, spics, gooks, and whoever else jump the fence or swim the oceans to get here, while you've got nothing good to say about America! Ever!!! You bad- mouth her for everything wrong in the world. And yet I bet you'll never pack your bags and move on outa here because, let's face it, where would you go?”

“You know, you got a lot of balls eliciting a supportive argument from the very people you spit on a daily basis,” rebuked Patrick. “You can't justify our country's greatness by cashing in on the desperation of these immigrants when you don't even want them here, period! End of story!!!”

This was the loudest Patrick had ever spoken to Darrel, being too far gone with emotional charge to be concerned about a possible steel-toed boot to the face.

“Touching story!!! You want me to play you a violin for all the poor foreigners coming over and stealing everything underneath us?!” Darrel quipped with the darkest sarcasm as Patrick could only react with a scoff. “Good work is hard to find these days and I'm supposed to make peace with some towel head taking a decent paying job from a family man born here?”

Patrick heard enough. It was time to expose Darrel's ideological contradiction. “But Darrel, I thought all of your Republican heroes praised this outsourcing? Perhaps one day

you'll never have to worry about immigration when there's not a job left in the States."

"Fuck off!!" Darrel burst in anger. "Just get the fuck outa my face!! I got work to do!!"

Darrel quickly turned around, waving his hand away at Patrick as if to blow away a bad stench. Once again, the focus was lost and the discussion had broken down to mudslinging. Just before he completely vanished from Darrel's sight, Patrick inhaled deeply and decided to end this conversation with a respectful answer to his question: Why does Patrick care so much about the mistreatment of a foreign man from a suspect nation?

"Hey Darrel, how far back can you trace your family lineage in America?"

The question had taken Darrel aback and required that Patrick repeat himself. Not knowing the point to the question, Darrel simply responded out of amusement.

"As far back as the Mayflower!!" Darrel had remarked with pride.

Patrick found it ironic that a man from religiously intolerant roots would feel such indignation towards a terrorist network founded upon religious intolerance. Whereas much of the Muslim world denies a formal education outside of the Qu'ran, performs female circumcision, and enforces Allah's Will in every function of society, Darrel himself believes Evolution should be banned from school, pharmacists should have the right to deny women the Pill, and prayer should be mandatory at all public gatherings.

"Well, mine can be traced back to the Potato Famine of 1847."

"So? You're a whiskey swiller... The fuck's your point?" Darrel was befuddled.

"Chances are, your ancestors were shitting on mine the moment they stepped off the boat in Boston," outlined Patrick. "My Great-Grandfather's Great Grandfather had been judged solely on his Limerick accent, and never given merit for his work ethic, his contributions, or his decency by WASP dickheads like you. The same piss-poor treatment you're giving Aslam today."

"He ain't Irish, and we ain't at war with Ireland, are we?!" clarified Darrel.

"No, but as Americans we are bound to him more than you realize," declared Patrick. "Everyone born here is a progeny of misfortunates and outcasts; no different than Aslam in struggling for a better life and unwanted elsewhere," continued Patrick. "So you wonder why I'm defending Aslam? It's because the man has integrity and proved himself worthy of citizenship. If you would just brave a closer look into his heart, perhaps you and I would see eye-to-eye as to who really defines an American, and you wouldn't dismiss him as a dishonor to the United States, as you love to accuse me of!"

"I honor my ancestors' encounter with cholera, malnutrition, wretched housing, and unfair seclusion from better work with better pay, by never cowardly dishing out that same racist shit-burger they were once fed. You can think of me as weak with compassion all you want, but I won't die a hypocrite!"

With a revitalized determination, Patrick refused Darrel any notable reaction as he himself quickly turned his back and walked away.

As far as Patrick was concerned, Darrel was less a true American patriot and more like another modern day "Know-Nothing."

THURSDAY

Aslam opened the front door to his apartment, payroll in hand. The blended smell of tandoori spice and chicken jolted his fixated mind from troubles of indignities, slang and degradations that occasionally made work a little harder to endure. For now, however, his domestic sanctuary awaited with promises of a full belly and rested feet.

Usually he possessed the fortitude to bear Darrel's day-long gauntlet of bellicose remarks, but being referred to as "Osama" went far beyond your tasteless, stereotypical name-calling. He learned to appreciate the humor behind "Habib" or "Sai Baba" or even "Mohammed" despite his Christian faith; such "ball-busting" as his co-workers called it were ritual attempts to break tensions caused by cultural barriers, as would be the case in calling the Laotian from the Water Department, "Jet Li." But Darrel invoked that name with such sublime but loathsome

hatred, stemming from some displaced need for retribution, and fell far from the mark of true justice. He spit forth the name from his memory as if to extract a poison:

Osama...

That very name invoked everything that exiled Aslam from his homeland of one hundred generations. In this name, his store burned to the ground. In this name, his wife and children turned their backs on him as if he were a ghost. In this name, Aslam faced a possible vendetta for crimes committed by a man he did not even share a nationality with, by the very people for whom he sought refuge, in a nation ironically founded by immigrants, sharing similar faith in a prophet whose primary rule of salvation lay in "Forgiveness."

He settled into the empathic embrace of his reclining chair...

A stern female voice called his name from the other side of the bathroom door, probably irritated once more with his inability to hear her beckoning him the first time. Her name was Alice... hardly the soft-spoken wallflower, but a beautiful survivor in her own right.

Four years and he still hadn't quite become accustomed to the competitive and demanding spirit of American women, but what he lost in servitude he felt he gained in the relief of knowing that free will and love had brought them to each other for companionship-- a luxury never experienced back home, being married to a woman selected by his parents.

"Why the hell don't you answer me when I call out to you?!!" griped his wife. "You know what your problem is, you never wear hearing protection when you're at work... what do I keep telling you about that?" Alice retorted before Aslam could even finish his apology.

With no desire to irritate her any longer, Aslam softly looked into her eyes and offered her his weekly pay without uttering another word, knowing full well the routine. The woman was remarkable with finances, as would be the case in raising three children on a part-time cashier's salary, divorced from a "no-good drunk bastard" that could barely express himself beyond a clenched fist.

"Your lawyer called back today." Alice began the afternoon conversation with business at the top of her list. "They've set a

date for an appeal on that cocksucker who denied your green card."

That "cocksucker" was the new Homeland agent who was quickly establishing a reputation for sending far more immigrants back to Muslim nations than would appear unbiased. His "bullshit" excuse for Aslam was suspecting his marriage vow as nothing but a sacrilegious business transaction; cash for citizenship. The end result, and growing, was twelve grand in the hole and a possible revocation of his work permit.

"The court date has been set for three Saturdays from now, so don't request the overtime that week." Alice concluded in a fashion that expressed the discussion over and done with, continuing on to other practical matters as she turned to prepare the evening meal cooking in the other room.

She suddenly felt a hand grab at her wrist that initially sparked a defensive reflex; that expectation of a blow to the face tempered by several years of a regretful lesson in blind young love. The jolt of fear subsided once that familiar sense of gentle reverence embraced her heart. Finally, she experienced the true purpose of masculinity: responsibility to her terms of emotional need.

But this time, Aslam was in need of assurance. She felt his resurfacing fear of deportation, his exhaustion from a debilitating debt--quite possibly in vain, and his heart burning with rage against those who belittled his love for Alice, symbolized by a gold band that must remain forever fast upon a finger residing next to another brutally removed for similar dedications to a Christian God.

She tenderly gripped his hand in a gesture of never letting go in a fidelitous sense. She reassured him with words nonetheless, "I don't care how much this'll cost in the end. No one is going to take away the only man that kept his promise to me!!!"

10:58 PM

As the evening was illuminated with the rising of a waxing moon, one day short of its fullest potential, Aslam and Alice settled into a good movie provided by the local rental. As tales of sequestered love reuniting in time for the closing credits flickered across the 29-inch length of convex glass, across town, Darrel

desperately searched for solace deep down the bottle of a 180-proof moonshine initially saved for special occasions.

Such the special occasion... according to Darrel.

Sparing no time after Darrel set foot in his apartment, his wife had relayed the news to him of his cousin killed; so ended his plans of rest after a full day's work. The weekly ritual of eating out together on pay day had been informally cancelled with Darrel retrieving his family-made medicine from a kitchen cabinet and retreating for the front door without returning a single word, feeling both distressed and abandoned.

The message traveled slowly from Iraq due to the military's selective, if not outright secretive, dissemination of information. The associated press were allowed their Sunday night tragedy print by Monday morning, even while the families of those fallen six will not receive confirmation for another 72 hours. While on escort duty, somewhere deep in the heart of the Sunni Triangle, a roadside explosive had detonated under the heavy weight of their armored vehicle. The blast tore through his cousin's body with such a force that it virtually disintegrated his lower half in a shower of red following a burning white flash. Five of his comrades suffered a similar fate, though many of them had remained consciously aware of their circumstances a few moments longer before death.

Darrel's rage and humiliation had compelled him to do something... SOMETHING!!!... else be doomed to fall upon his own vengeful sword. Yet the only option he could think of, in releasing this tense yearning to wield death, was to drive. Simply drive.

The dangerous speed somehow fed the illusion of his own visceral competence to strike down his enemies with immediate ease. But the embarrassment... God, the embarrassment he felt for the pins in his left leg and the synthetic vertebrae fixed within his lower back. He grew up a proud and powerful young man. He possessed little discipline to guide his passion in proving himself indestructible to the world, and he eventually paid the price with injuries that denied him his destiny as a war hero. Irreversible damage through careless, adolescent ritual held far little glory for him when he compared it to the wartime bullet from a total stranger within a strange land. If he had the choice to alter the past, for the chance to die along with his cousin... no hesitation.

For the expendable gender, per order of mother nature's breeding design of a billion years running, there is no greater honor than to risk all for the protection of those greater than himself. Whatever that may be, illusion or otherwise, decides the rise and fall of empires...

The near-paint thinner began to affect his head as his driving proved potentially fatal, coming only inches from side-swiping an unsuspecting teenage party girl snuggled within her Volkswagen candy-coated bug. Thinking twice about continuing his endless pursuit of phantoms, he pulled into the parking lot of a local convenience store, with lights off and doors locked to indicate that one must wait until morning for their daily fix of caffeine, nicotine, or high fructose corn syrup for the children.

This side-street retail market carried the very generic name, "Quick Stop Mini Mart." After some idle time to think, Darrel recognized where he was and how he got here. He rekindled the memory of his acquaintance with the owner, though nothing personal; he simply bought gas here accompanied by the usual "Hey Guy" or "Wassup."

Darrel focused his attention towards the well-tattered American flag that hung from his rear-view mirror; a gift from his cousin overseas converted into a token reminder of the fun times spent as children and the duties performed up until just four nights prior. Perhaps one more assignment was laid for action in his cousin's memory, executed vicariously through this dirty symbolic fabric that dangled freely above his dashboard.

As two chimes sounded off from a distant church steeple, throughout the empty moonlit streets with no one awake to hear it... almost... a heavy concrete cinder-block shattered the front store window with little resistance. Through the newly unwelcome opening soared a clear wine-style bottle half-filled with a disinfectant spirit, topped with flaming rag adorned with red bars, white stars, and a contrasting solid blue. The merchandise within fueled the pyre easily as a large pick-up truck screeched out of sight, down the road with a trailing burnt rubber smell.

As the fire alarm began to signal the utter destruction of one family's financial sustenance, A Hindu father lay in bed asleep, unaware of the effigy's role he must endure in the morning.

FRIDAY

“Unusually pleasant,” Aslam assessed to himself.

Everything that compiled this autumn day had fallen into place as if a blessing; the weather promiscuous, sky clear of any threatening grey, an early spring breeze, a tender sun, even the artificial machinations had made a symbiotic consideration with Mother Nature as these typically fickle containers of gears, wires, and belts ran so dedicatingly smooth. The finished product passed through quality control with efficient numbers escalating off the charts. His fellow workers were precise and flawless with their daily rituals, even as their weekend anticipations saturated the air; no static, no surge, “no shit.”

Such a successful summation!!! Aslam could even discard Darrel's absence... bedridden to be sure... as the pinnacle highlight; the less credit awarded to him the better, as Aslam could see it.

Nearly time to punch out... Better call my wife... calculated Aslam.

Patrick had approached Aslam about getting together after work for a drink and conversation, a first step above the routine chit-chatting in the break room. After Aslam had made it clear he abstained from alcohol for religious purposes, their destination was settled on a diner renowned for its powerful black coffee.

Aside from not calling earlier, as Alice had stated very clearly, “Well thanks a lot for telling me now when I’ve already started supper!!!” they had reached a consensus: return before nine, and expect the food in the fridge.

Nightfall had arrived remarkably earlier from just a week before the daylight savings, but the full moon assured him that his day's perfect sun would linger in whispers of midnight blue and deep purple. Aslam commandeered the times between pauses in conversation and sips of caffeinated nectar to behold the celestial landscape through the diner window, with little interference from caked-on grease and indoor lighting glare as proof that today's harmonious fortune would remain faithfully for twenty-four hours.

Patrick had inquired into Aslam's past more boldly than their usual interaction at work had allowed, as if to seize upon a rare opportunity. He never mentioned Aslam's amputated left

pinky finger in conversation, though where his eyes periodically focused was blatantly confessional. Aslam had no qualms in shedding light on the subject, but somehow he thought it appropriate to allow Patrick his bravery to ask.

Aslam did, however, speak of his necessity to remain here in America for the right to practice his faith:

"Here... I worship without fear... It is... my right. Right for all here. I earn my right... I work... I pay taxes... I respect law... I dress like American and honor... customs. In Pakistan, everything taken from me. Nothing left. I... denounced... faith in Allah... became Christian... Death for me if I return... I can't go back."

The oppressive treatment a Christian would endure in his homeland, as Aslam described it, sounded eerily similar to the notorious Jim Crow Laws of the historic Deep South, as Patrick further pointed out:

"I understand how important it is that you're never deported, and yes, no one here will ever deny your right to worship as a Christian. Just keep in mind one thing, there are blacks who still remember whites burning down their churches."

Aslam was shocked by what he heard this. "Christians were... persecuted here too?"

"In a matter of sorts, yes." replied Patrick.

"Which faith did this?" inquired Aslam.

Patrick could see how Aslam was confused, "Other Christians did this. You've got to understand that many here hailed themselves as virtuous Christians, doing God's work, mind you, and yet enslaved, persecuted, and murdered people with dark skin throughout the centuries. These men believed God was as white as they were, so it didn't bother them to leave a black man's congregation in smoldering ruin."

"But Jesus... a Jew." commented Aslam.

"Yup. Hardly the Scandinavian we've portrayed him as here," chided Patrick in return.

Aslam searched for affirmation that this was no longer a current problem, "This doesn't... happen now?"

"Well, crosses still burn today from time to time, though not quite as often as, say, the earlier half of the 20th century, when the KKK had their fashionable spotlighted return... Birth of a Nation, that sort of shit."

"Crosses burn?... churches burn?... by Christians?" At this point, Aslam couldn't fathom the scenario.

"It fucks you up, doesn't it?" concurred Patrick. "Hatred can take on some VERY bizarre forms. Even more strange are the excuses they spew to justify the violence, like a blond Jesus, as I mentioned earlier. If Jesus were to make his grand second appearance right this very minute, as many of our more rabid fundamentalists are holding their breath for on a daily basis, I have my doubts they would even recognize him as their savior. They'd probably call him a heretic; they would only see a 'hippy kike faggot' standing before them."

"Are you Christian?" asked Aslam.

"No, I don't call myself a Christian... was raised one, though." replied Patrick.

"Why you have no faith?" continued Aslam with his inquiry.

"I do have faith," corrected Patrick. "I just choose to not associate with any one religion, only out of consideration for the many others that condone essentially the same virtues. It's funny how the self-righteous claim monopoly on morality when the more important ones, like murder, cheating, lying, stealing, dishonoring loved ones, seemed to be universal."

"You think Muslim... and Christian... equal?" Aslam asked.

"Why not?" retorted Patrick. "It seems only the trite and trivial matters separate us: Who was the prophet to enlighten us? What is God's name? How do we properly worship him? What rituals do we perform? Which sex acts really piss him off? Who can rightfully claim to be God's chosen people? All of it pure BULLSHIT, in my opinion."

"But Muslim... Christian... Hindu... worship different god," declared Aslam with mild retaliation.

"Do we?" remarked Patrick Socratically. "Aren't we all from the same source?"

"But only one can be right," rebuked Aslam in defiance.

"Could any of us be entirely right?" Patrick had finalized his point. "The word of God, the wisdoms of the world, the truth that binds us may all be perfect, but aren't we, as humans, inherently flawed? If this be the case, then wouldn't it be less than a question of faith and more of interpretation? And if that was

true, shouldn't we have been engaging in calm debate rather than bathing in blood throughout the centuries?"

Patrick took a deep breath and a sip of coffee, "Could whatever name we attribute to God ever encompass, or justify, her omnipotence and limitless love? What's in a name for a concept greater than any definition?"

There was a long pause. Not necessarily awkward silence, but rather much to contemplate.

"In all seriousness, I strive to experience divinity with every waking breath. I sense its presence in every fabric of my being and forever expanding in all directions. However, I cannot allow myself to assume that one perception of God holds more truth over another, so long as one's heart and mind serve the principles of love for all of God's manifestations."

After a slight pause, Patrick continued, "Out of respect for your religious beliefs, I hope you'll become a citizen someday and ensure a happy life here."

Aslam vocalized his opinion that a "Christian Nation" should feel obliged to offer asylum to fellow worshipers elsewhere, wherever they're oppressed and silenced. Patrick remarked in quotation, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

Patrick turned his head towards the mounted television screen, which displayed a ninety-second news coverage of Homeland Security agents, giving their best Gestapo impressions, wrangling handcuffed Mexican refugees into the backs of fortified transport vehicles.

He then whispered in mantra, "Sanctuary for all, lest freedom for none."

Justice is purely Justice... Patrick contemplated.

SATURDAY

Aslam was awakened just before his alarm setting by a distinctively different ring.

The phone.

A heavy sickness suddenly settled into the pit of his stomach. The fact that someone was calling him so early in the

morning, which had initially annoyed him, now filled him with a sense of dread.

Whatever news awaits me, this cannot be good... Aslam fretted.

Aslam's ex-wife was found murdered in a back alley street in Karachi. Four masked men had dragged her from public sight as she was returning from a market store. One fired a bullet from a hand-held 9mm beretta into her back, then three more into her head as she lay face down on the dirty pavement. This was told to him over the phone at 4:30 in the morning by his uncle who felt he must be aware in spite of his family's choice to banish him from further contact. If for no other reason, just to ensure that Aslam was properly informed, thus shamed for the consequences of averting his eyes from Allah's righteous principles.

It was as if Aslam himself had held the Grim Scythe that cut down the mother of his three children, during the time he sat with an American friend and a cup of coffee on the other side of the world, admiring the soft golden halo that crowned the waxing moon of his perfect evening.

Working seven days per week had been Aslam's choice of habit since his first day, until today. His bread-winning pride had been shattered by a humiliating circumstance beyond his control, and debatably his fault. It appears that a man can withstand virtually any kinetic hardship, yet crumble in despair by a simple misinterpretation, truth being irrelevant.

He called out from work...

Illness.

Alice remained quiet throughout the day...

Speechless.

Reasons diverted by a "busy schedule."

Much to do.

5:47 PM

This day's late afternoon defined the time for Aslam's weekly church attendance. Once a Roman Catholic amidst the children of Islam and now a Protestant due to protests from his wife, he delivered little resistance to the change. Denomination meant nothing to the faithful in Pakistan, persecuted and small in numbers. It was Alice that begrudged the particular sect anyway.

Growing up in an orphanage under the care of nuns and a single priest had influenced her conclusion that the house was “run by sadists, perverts, and hypocrites!!” He chose simply to comply more, inquire less.

Before tonight, his sparsely decorated house of worship was a comfort... humble like him. These quiet intervals of meditative prayers, to whomever loved and hated him equally, revitalized his strength; that strength which fueled his perseverance to maintain his principles, forgiving those who sought blindly the outlet of rage through his open heart.

The alternative wasn't a viable option; never letting go of the suffering he endured from both ignorance and simple fate would have disintegrated everything dear in him, down to an empty lifeless shell...

As is the case for so many others...

From both ends of a vastly empty ocean.

Aslam recollected an untitled poem from an undisclosed author:

Thousands of people, for thousands of years

Enthralled by the scapegoat's bleating

Remain disharmoniously enchanted to the suicidal choir

Vendetta's cantata.

True, for Aslam, to absolve was like second nature... but not tonight.

A knot clenched in his stomach; something fearful, thus imperative to assail. This, which sought to tear into his insides and erode hollow a man desperate for a remaining shred of life-bearing compassion, could not be readily identified at first. Afraid at first to confront the emotion outright, Aslam then mustered the courage to confront this looming assassin of his preferred psyche, still as much a part of himself though reluctant to admit it.

Yes... Still capable of forgiving those Americans who'd permanently seal the gates of Ellis Island, to reserve the cages in Gitmo for the invasion of “dark-skinned camel jockeys” like himself.

Yes... This includes Darrel... especially Darrel.

But what of his flesh and blood back home? Those with whom he shared a lineage, a history, an aesthetic likeness, even the accent in his voice? Nothing. Nothing but contempt.

I've fallen from grace! clamored Aslam with horror deep within.

His wife died an effigy for his supposed sins, his children now orphaned and forever kept from contact, now Aslam furiously burns away all that remains of a spiritual fugitive, in hopes of reincarnating, from these tears-soaked ashes, a desert-born Son of Liberty.

Kneeling down in a Spartan temple, gilded in an symbolic off-white coating, a devout disciple of a philanthropic vision now dreams of punishment, cold steel, uranium fissure, a lingering pungent stench, those marked for heresy with their backs against the goddamned wall, and the funeral pyre consuming the dead in a glowing, blood-red hue.

Compassion for strangers, but no mercy for intimates? Why? The question triggered a flashback to that immaculate, yet murderous evening over coffee as Patrick expressed his contempt for American foreign policy:

“One September morning, a score of Saudi radical Muslims, armed with box-cutters, tear down two identical ramparts in our impenetrable Fortress America, boasting almost two hundred years of no foreign invasion... As within our right, we retaliate. But how? by ousting a secular Iraqi dictator who was, crazy enough, equally a godless infidel in the eyes of our attackers.

“Don't get me wrong, Hussein's a genocidal prick, but how is he different from the many other tyrants we've befriended, allied, and empowered over the Cold War years? Was it worth getting bogged down in a segregated land where the people hate each other only slightly less than their foreign occupiers?

“Meanwhile, as billions of dollars are unaccounted for in Iraq, with little funding left to neutralize our original Al Qaeda threat in Afghanistan... for four years, four long years, I've been harassed, threatened, and tormented by my own fellow American brothers for simply questioning the motives of an elected president, as constitutionally protected in the First Amendment.

“As an example, during the beginning of the war, I had attended a demonstration against our preemptive strike in Iraq. I was a recent Communications graduate covering a story as a free-lancer. I believed our reasons for war questionably vague and the facts distorted, so I sided with the demonstrators as having the right to peacefully assemble and protest the lack of further UN

investigation. So, for my patriotic duty to prevent government corruption, I was beaten unconscious by riot police. My personal information was placed on record on some bullshit "potential terrorist" list. My paper was never touched by any reputable newspaper, news magazine, or broadcast, and none of my work since then has been published outside of non-profit, independent media; I had been blacklisted. This is why I possess a Masters in Journalism and yet I work at a paper mill to make ends meet.

"Why was it permissible to label me a terrorist sympathizer for having doubts in the effectiveness of our tactics to quell terrorism? What if I was correct? What happened to checks and balances?"

Aslam had noticed that Patrick seemed much more impassioned when speaking of American failures in judgment in responding to the terrorist attack than the provocation itself. This didn't settle well with Aslam. Aside from suspicions and verbal abuse, no "Yankee" had attempted to take his life... at least, not yet.

Aslam had much to ponder over Patrick's hostility:

Could Patrick have underestimated the Muslim menace because he lacks direct loss?

Could his lack of faith in the righteous be the dark clouding within his judgment?

Could Darrel have been right to label Patrick a traitor?

To Aslam, It seemed inherently logical to put aside your differences with your neighbors in times of trouble for all; why protest the demands for sacrifices with in how to live when you're faced with invaders who threaten your basic right to life? Even to assume that Lincoln's proverb, "A house divided will not stand" did not apply to today's circumstances, couldn't Patrick at least find it within himself to even forgive his own people, who are simply reactive with justifiable fear of those religiously committed to violence against them?

After several minutes of interpreting Aslam's broken English, Patrick eventually understood that Aslam mistook his embittered speech towards his nation as outright loathing.

"So, I opposed the standard theory of how we should deal with terrorists, while you chose to follow a different prophet," Patrick clarified himself with straightforwardness. "Was there any

justification to the suppressions we both faced? It was only a difference in degree.

"Currently, no one can rightfully execute me for the distrust of my government, while you were almost killed under the radical interpretations of Islamic Law, I understand that. But don't assume that a difference in ideology defines a difference in character. No matter what their beliefs are... no matter whatsoever... any person who cannot risk the possibility of being proven wrong is one dangerous bastard; it's only a question of opportunity that decides an intolerant person deadly or otherwise.

"I never could comprehend how a person so sure of their own convictions could feel so threatened by a simple disagreement."

Patrick then decided to discard protocol and order a beer to calm his nerves.

"Do not mistake me for a man who hates his country," testified Patrick. "I love and live for the principles it was built upon, but I get enraged when my people fail to uphold them because, in fact, I do care."

"But... you hold much... anger... towards your brothers," Aslam pointed out what appeared to him as a contradiction.

Patrick had an answer to the paradox, "Rage requires intimacy. It may seem that one should tolerate inequity from a brother more so than a stranger, but you cannot readily dismiss a loved one's actions with apathy."

The waitress returned with Patrick's beer and he paused to open, pour, and drink down a frothy gulp. Sensing Aslam was sitting patiently for further explanation, Patrick continued:

"The process of freedom was never automatic, anywhere in the world. It requires much hard work, time, and sometimes martyrdom to prevent tyranny from the powerful and stupefied indifference from their subjects. All I asked for was a fair debate, that's all! What I received were thirty stitches in my fucking head!

"So now I ask you, Aslam, who betrayed who?"

SUNDAY

Aslam carried on with his work in spite of this horrid, lethargic feeling that threatened to overwhelm him at any

moment. His first day's rest in several weeks did just the opposite, and his early departure from last night's sermon exposed a man in metaphysical turmoil to his wife, whose outreaching concerns he had outright rejected.

"Where are you going? What's wrong?" she had asked.

No acknowledgment...

Patrick had sensed the disturbance in Aslam's disassociative behavior; highly unusual to one familiar with his affectionate personality. Patrick made no further attempt in prying him open, as normal protocol amongst men would dictate; bad days occur and pride prevents the acceptance of lent hands or ears...

But no rules against a watchful eye... thought Patrick.

Equally out of character was Darrel, having volunteered today for the prospects of double-time pay, since he's typically reliable in "keeping the Sabbath holy." Aslam made great effort to avoid Darrel at all costs; he no longer had the patience for his racist antics.

The nature of Aslam's work required him to assist in fixing any machine that malfunctioned if proven too complicated for the operator himself. As fate would have it, only one machine failed beyond repair.

"Hey, Taliban... pull a Jihad on this piece of shit and fix it, will ya!!" snarled Darrel from across the room.

Aslam stopped completely dead in his tracks in a desperate attempt to maintain composure. With barely the strength to move, he eventually found his way over to Darrel's stubborn contraption, struggling to pay exclusive attention to the problem at hand.

Patrick surveyed the situation with great concern for Aslam's welfare. His anger increased towards Darrel, with his immature need to release tension at someone else's expense. Patrick promised himself he'd intervene before Darrel crossed over that invisible line to cause something undetermined, irreversible, and regrettable to occur.

"I'll knock his dead brain out of his fucking skull, If he lays a hand on Aslam! I'm growing tired of his shit!!!" Patrick said aloud, but to himself.

The delicate situation grew increasingly risky, as the machine failed to indicate the reasons for its sickly, sputtering momentum.

"The Hell!!" bellowed Darrel. "I thought you knew how to fix these things?! You're fucking with my production rate!!"

Darrel became increasingly hostile with pretense, as if to blame Aslam outright for the initial breakdown. Aslam reached into his toolbox for his stilson wrench, in preparation for a final attempt to revive the dying metal beast.

Darrel went too far, "It's nice to know that a real American can't work here, because some bleeding-heart made it mandatory to hire a token Heeb who doesn't know what the fuck he's doing!!" He then spat on the ground to further disgrace.

Aslam had reached the breaking point; he turned away from both Darrel and his mechanical mess, wrench in hand, heading straight for the exit with no other desire than to remove himself from the source of discontentment.

He had dreamt of freedom under a warm temperate sun for so long, but was cast out into the desert by suspicions of terrorist plots. He craved the sense of belonging to this legendary community of second chances, but all this time never receiving his first. He could no longer fathom a future in this land; his struggle to assimilate within this melting-pot resembled more like the consistency of oil and water, floating to the top in a dead pool.

"Hey Jawa!!! Where are you fucking going?!!" Darrel took to heart Aslam's display of silent defiance as an utter insult. Without even pausing to think of the circumstances he had created for Aslam and himself, he pursued him past the front entrance with full intent to engage in physical confrontation.

Patrick followed shortly behind with his blood boiling for retribution, on behalf of his friend so pressed under the weight of ignorance from all directions.

"Don't you turn your fucking back on me!!" screamed Darrel.

Aslam stopped completely still, back still facing away.

Silence fell from both of them, aside from the involuntary heavy breathing and the consistent pounding from quickened heart rates.

"Turn around... Now!!" Darrel demanded this conflict, face-to-face.

Patrick swiftly intervened from nowhere seen by shoving both hands into Darrel's back, catching him off-guard. Darrel quickly recaptured his footing, and returned a strong, right hook

into Patrick's jaw, sending him asunder backwards into the concrete wall. A sickening crack indicated clearly the breaking of bone.

THUD!!

Another nauseating sound was heard. Hollow, like the cracking of a 10-pound egg. A deep expulsion of air escaped someone's lips, slumping face first and motionless. A pool of blood quickly soaked the porous pavement surrounding his caved-in head.

Darrel.

Aslam stood above the carnage, wrench in hand, slowly coming to his senses.

"What have I done?" cried Aslam softly in disbelief.

Patrick was unaware of his surroundings, barely conscious, due to excruciating pain.

No matter. Nowhere to run.

The wrench slipped out of Aslam's hand like his future slipping beyond his control.

No chance for citizenship.

Immediate deportation, unless to serve a life sentence here.

Whatever destiny, death awaited... as if staring back at him through the seeping mortal wound he had caused. This was the first time he had ever raised his hand in violence. A lifetime spent forgiving those who tested his faith and up until now showing great ability to rise above a mere reaction, all to end in one fatal mistake...

No forgiveness in return.

MEETING THE WHIRLWIND

Lindsey Reneé Lacombe

Jenna hadn't been an adolescent for very long, but she knew beyond question that she would never be the girl that hangs all over her boyfriend and giggles about the color of her nail polish. Anytime she saw excessive displays of affection she inwardly gagged, how could anyone make such a fool of themselves?

All her life she had striven to do the right thing, she felt the happiest when her parents were proud of her. What she did or didn't do was to keep her universe in order, like an equation—if you behave this way, this is the product. She knew what was expected of her morally, academically and spiritually. In the context of church and school, she was a model of what a good daughter is supposed to be. Fully aware of this, no one could ever induce her to betray her standards.

One of the many extra-curricular activities Jenna attended was a youth group that met once a week. She hung out with a bunch of kids her age who were like-minded about God and living for Him. It was a tradition with them to all travel en masse to “Friendly’s” and get ice creams. They prided themselves in being the biggest table there and subsequently the loudest.

Jenna had many friends among them: Hannah was obsessed with rubber duckies, and Steve had a spider-web tattoo on his right elbow. Juan could tie the stem of a cherry into a knot in his mouth; Nickie was an aspiring hair stylist and would be seen “updoing” girls hair. Roger was on the worship team and he sometimes brought his acoustic guitar (which he'd named Carl) into the restaurant. Troy was an avid Bible scholar who could tell you the grandson of Eli was Ichabod and that his name meant “inglorious.” Troy's sister, Helena, knew all the waitresses by name and could get free ice cream. Kirsten secretly worshipped the god of chocolate but no one held it against her. Those were the core

people; others came and went, but Jenna was closest to those eight.

Sometimes there would be as many as fifteen rowdy teenagers, laughing and talking; making messes with their melting Heath Bar Sundaes. The group of them had been hanging out together since they'd started youth group as freshmen—though Jenna was at least two years younger than everybody else, but no one could tell the age difference so it didn't matter (not that they would have ostracized her).

At that time in her life, she cherished her friends at Littleton Assembly, because she didn't really have any friends at school. No one made fun of her but she did not feel included. It was with her friends at church that she felt fully accepted for who she was. People actually wanted to hang out with her outside youth group, which implied they actually *wanted* to be with her because they felt inclined to, not just due to circumstance.

Jenna was glad when Troy started showing up in his cherry red sports car during her sophomore year of high school. She knew that Troy was a very social person and he must be very busy visiting everyone's houses. He was weird, but if he wanted to come over, she didn't mind. Jenna enjoyed seeing him goof around with her brothers and play "Uno" with the whole family. Some nights he just talked with her Dad at the kitchen counter about the Bible. Troy coming over became a customary event and her mother began setting a place for him at dinner.

Troy was a great friend and his friendship was greatly valued by Jenna. He was taller than she was, he always wore polo shirts with stripes of some kind and khaki pants. His hair was chestnut brown and he had deep amber eyes—but Jenna didn't really notice any of that, until the Thanksgiving of her junior year.

It was the end of the day, after all the blueberry pie and homemade cheesecake had been dished out and the family (and Troy) were chatting in the living room. The conversation lulled a little. Troy said, "I brought the pictures from my trip to Europe, if you want to look at them."

"Are they in your car?" Jenna asked.

"They're on a disk. Can we look at them on your computer?" Troy asked her Mom.

Troy sat down on the wheeled chair in front of the computer and Jenna sat on a stool to his right. He showed her

pictures of all the places he went to see in Europe. It was while he was narrating his vast collection of photographs that Jenna noticed a couple things. First of all, how nice he looked—he'd dressed up because it was a holiday. Secondly, how good he smelled, she wondered why she'd never noticed it before. The warm lighting of the desk lamp on his face brought out his features and he suddenly didn't look like a boy anymore, he was older and stronger.

Jenna noticed these things while she was also trying to concentrate on the pictures, but either he didn't notice her divided attention or he didn't mind. She tried to focus on the words he was saying, but all she could hear was the sound of his voice.

It was this same night that Troy confessed to Jenna that he'd been in love with her since the first time he'd laid eyes on her. In his heart he believed that Jenna was the one for him, the one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. Jenna found it hard to fathom that anybody could love her that way; she was enchanted by the notion of such a love.

This disclosure propitiated an increase of Troy's presence as well as a new element in his being there. They started going places together, just the two of them—nowhere romantic necessarily, just Jenna's favorite store in the whole world, Barnes and Noble (books *and* coffee!).

Jenna enjoyed the mystery of being liked by someone else, she liked that he thought she was beautiful. It took her a while to get used to it though; she was shy to begin with. Partly because technically she was not allowed to date, but whether or not what was happening between them was technically sanctioned or not, it was happening.

Every new intimacy was a shock to her: when they held hands for the first time in his car, when he kissed her goodnight on the cheek at the end of a beautiful dinner with Troy's friend Spencer and his girlfriend.

Jenna had never felt so special before, no one had ever made her feel this way. She began to shirk away from her tomboyish tendencies and gradually started dressing more femininely, going so far as to actually wear pastels.

A year went by. Their relationship grew more relaxed and they spent more time together. What they were wasn't a secret,

everyone knew they liked each other; it's just that no one really knew what to call them—but it was a definite something.

On different occasions Jenna watched her parents with Troy, watched for any signs of disapproval that only an experienced eye would notice—Mom pursing her lips, Dad's silence combined with excessive jaw-clenching. She saw none of these ill-boding signs. They invited him over for dinner any time they saw him and treated him like one of their adult friends. One night, everyone in the house was going to bed and the couple was sitting in the living room finishing "The Four Feathers". As her parents were saying goodnight, Jenna thought that any minute they would tell him he had to leave, but they didn't do that. This event confused her; it made her question the great equation. However, she liked that they didn't mind because she wanted to be alone with Troy—and she wondered what other laws were likewise flexible.

It was a snowy day in late November, Troy and Jenna were at the mall in the jewelry store where they were waiting for the ring he had gotten her for her birthday to be cleaned. They felt much older than they were in the jewelry store surrounded by such expensive things.

"You can have any one you want." Troy laughed.

"How much is that one?" She asked in a Victorian accent.

Troy bent down to read the price, "\$799, your grace."

She waved her hand dismissively, "Too little..."

They laughed unabashedly, making the sales people a little nervous, but this made them feel even sillier. They left when the ring was cleaned and looked very much brand new.

The couple walked to his car, hand in hand, pretending to smoke as they expelled their warm breath. Troy put the heat on in the car and they listened to "Sinatra's Greatest Love Songs" while they waited for the car to warm up. For whatever reason, Troy tilted his seat back and reclined, putting his hands behind his head—he closed his eyes. For a moment, Jenna felt awkward, not knowing what to do.

Jenna looked at Troy, then down at the floor in front of her feet. Seconds passed and his presence filled the car exponentially, the air was thick and when she breathed, she was breathing him in. A warm pressure germinated in the pit of her stomach. A part of her mind she had never encountered before took over; she put

her seat back and leaned across Troy, touching her lips to his. She caressed his face and saw how beautiful and perfect he was. She kissed him again and he responded, his arms encircling her.

Troy gently laid Jenna down onto her back; he brushed the hair out of her face. He smiled at her. "This is unexpected," he whispered.

Jenna could only look into the bottomless depths of his eyes, full of melted sunshine. In the deep of his gaze, she felt him knowing her somehow, knowing her in a way she had never been known before. Troy pressed his lips gently to hers, his hand behind her neck. Jenna felt the warmth in her belly sink and explode as their mouths opened to each other. She noticed her breathing had changed and she suddenly remembered the rest of the world—but Troy's hand on the bare skin under her shirt pushed it all far away.

It ended shortly after that shocking sensation. The two of them reined themselves in, amazed. Neither of them had ever experienced anything like it before.

Troy dropped Jenna off at home. She was thankful the house was dark and everyone was in bed. She flicked on the light in the bathroom and stared at her reflection in the mirror. The image had gotten older. The new feelings and emotions swirled around in her head as she brushed her teeth and got ready for bed.

Beneath the warm comforter, she saw everything that had happened as though it was on a movie screen. Regret crept in and sat on the foot of the bed, and with it guilt. It had been so easy to set aside everything that wasn't relevant to that moment, her values, morals, convictions—where had they all gone? What would her parents say if they knew?

That night started a conflict in her soul that refused to be quieted. It fermented inside her for months and she grieved that she was keeping a secret from her mom. The turmoil in her soul changed the way she looked at unmarried mothers, at those girls who hung all over their boyfriends—she looked at them differently after that. Compassion replaced snobbery; genuine love took the place of disdain. It doesn't take much for a person to forget who they are when they are in the hot, balmy whirlwind of human emotions.

SHOE BOX

Gennilla Millan

Place to keep my secrets
yet my most hidden desires.
Alone in a dark old shoe box
Photos of the boyfriend—though it never happened.
Notes from classes,
Small gifts along with
Greeting cards: from all sorts.
Yet it was something; it was merely the past.
It's nothing but an old down grungy box
with false *memories*; of a foul smell of old shoes.

HOMELESS MEMORIES

Gennilla Millan

A day gone by without a trace
Not even a sight in view.
If only, I could find my way home
If only, I wasn't really lost
Had I never seen this before—
Is this what I call home?

WIDOW

Gennilla Millan

I wonder upon windowsill
In search of something—
Hoping that you be the only reason
You would be here.
Yet you're only a whisper in my ear,
But, grave stone too far to reach.



AnnMarie Ferguson

WITH YOU

AnnMarie Ferguson

The room,
 dark.
Softly glowing candles,
shadows dancing.
Soft skin,
 scent of soap.
Your hands in mine,
 gentle, loving...
And your eyes, deep brown
 velvety pools
like mirrors to your soul.
I'm falling,
 swirling colors,
 throbbing notes,
 beats matching my heart.
A kiss, soft and sweet
 and I am yours...
Eternally.

MY VAMPIRE BELOVED

AnnMarie Ferguson

He swept down upon her,
the crimson of his cloak flashing in the moonlight.
He caressed her countenance with hands of stone and ice,
Tilting her head back to expose
the porcelain paleness of her throbbing throat.
He brushed her silken mane of raven-hued hair away,
Freeing the curve of skin
that so delicately encased her veins,
so full of her pure raspberry nectar.
He brought his ashen lips close to her body,
a breath against her face,
her body filled with an erotic electricity as the pearlescent fangs
pierced her alabaster skin.
The scarlet syrup flooded against his frozen lips,
tantalizing his tongue as the liquid slid down his throat.
Her slender, slight body grew cold and lifeless
and he released her from his embrace,
letting her slide onto satin sheets
To dream in her newly endless sleep.

IN THIS PAIN

AnnMarie Ferguson

You used to call me crystal.
Only now your colors
have turned to grey in my eyes,
And melody is no longer song
but screams of pain.
As the daggers of Darkness
bring bleeding lips to your cheek,
leaving a trail of crimson...
sweet and soft to touch.
But you draw away in disgust.
If only understanding
came in a glass jar
I could smash it upon this marble floor
And walk upon the shards
Of your mind.

UNKNOWN ROAD

Amanda Williams-Jordan

As I stroll through the valley
This voyage called 'LIFE'
I long to be acknowledged and cherished by someone!
I've stood my ground of being single
I've stood my ground of trying to see people as my equal!
I've looked unto the left!
Nothing but worthlessness!
I've looked unto the right!
Darkness was upon my sight!
Traveling upon these hard journeys!
Looking for the less challenging obstacle!
I test my opportunities
However, nothing feels new to me!
This voyage called 'LIFE'
Is an unbreakable job to overcome!
I tried so hard to understand
What parts I should stand sturdy as well as my lives diagram!
I feel so dysfunctional to most of humanity's
expectations!
I don't comprehend! Who I am?
Tears are bitter sweet!
Not in the mood to weep!
Not in the mood to recline!
Not in the mood to crave!
Not in the mood to utter!
All my goals in life
Are to overcome these obstacle!
And finish this voyage called 'LIFE'
Strictly who I am
And stand for what I trust in as
A self-sufficient woman!

DO ANYTHING

Amanda Williams-Jordan

I will do anything to be except
Even if it means '*****'
O' yeah I cannot say that!
I will do anything to be loved
Even if I have to damage one-self!
I will do anything to be a babe magnate
Even if it means I have to advertise myself!
I will do anything to be a pimp
Even if means I have to disregard myself
I will do anything to be except
Even if it means
I have to hurt someone else
I will do anything to be except
Even if it means I have to deny the existence of
My culture as well as my home!
I will do anything to be except
Even if I have to risk my life to drink or get
High tonight!
I will do anything to be except
Even if it takes me to get ADIS!
As long as I can sleep around and get mad game!
I will do anything to be except
Even if I have to lie, cheat, and, steal, it does not matter
Who I kill!
I will do anything to be except
Even if I have to put a man first before God!
I will do anything to be except
Even if I have to go against my own beliefs,
It does not matter, as long I am relieve.
I will do anything to be except
Even if I have to buy experiences, clothes

And have a flash car,
But a messed-up home!
I will do anything to be except
Even if I have to be a follower!
However, not a leader!
But why not a baler?
I will do anything to be except
Even if I neglected myself!
It does not matter as long I get accepted by everyone else!

FROZEN MUSE

Tara O'Brien

It was one hour and counting since she'd lost sight of civilization. How far were they going? This really was the sticks, why would anyone live this far out?

"We'll be at your Aunt Shelley's house soon kids," announced their Mother. "I forgot how far out she lives."

Rika leaned her head on her hand and stared out the car window, which still had some icy glaze on the corners. It was like a sea. Endless snow-covered pines blending and bending together like waves as far as the eye could see. Rika thought it beautiful at first, but prolonged exposure had caused this initial feeling to fade. It was turning into a world of silhouettes now, as at three o'clock the sun was already falling from the sky and casting heavy shadows on the earth.

"Do we really have to do this?" asked Rika's brother Rodney from the back seat. At eleven he was three years younger than Rika and had unmanageable red hair just like their father. Rika's, on the other hand, was more like their mother and had flat brown hair that fell just above her shoulders, when it wasn't tied into a pony tail.

"I'm sorry," answered their mother, "This business trip came up very suddenly, so I couldn't find a sitter." Their parents both held full time positions in companies, but it was usually their father that had to go on business trips, not their mother. It had come quite out of the blue, but it was far too profitable a chance for her to pass up. "It will only be for three days, then I'll be back and your father the next day, so we can celebrate the holidays together."

Rodney groaned and slumped back into the seat. He hated long car rides.

The road was packed down with snow and Rika could hear it crunching beneath the tires of their SUV.

"Anyways, your aunt was nice enough to let you stay with her, so I expect you kids to be on your best behavior understood?" Rodney shrugged off an agreement and began strumming a rubber band he had found on the car floor. Their mother then turned to Rika, "Rika you look after your brother alright?" There was no answer so she took her eyes off the road and glanced over at her. "Did you hear me Rika?"

Rika jumped and quickly nodded her head, "Yah I did..." but not with any real comprehension. She'd been spacing out, her mind drifting amongst the trees as they rolled by.

"What does Aunt Shelley do anyway?" asked Rodney.

"She's an artist... I think."

Rika didn't know much about her aunt and she'd certainly never been to her house before. She only really saw her at family at get-togethers and occasional visits and she always struck her as being a bit weird, nice...but weird. In fact Rika kind of liked that about her. Aunt Shelley was something different in her life that always seemed so average.

A sudden wind began to blow and Rika watched it vaguely. It was moving through the trees knocking snow from their boughs. Most of the snow then drifted down like fine flour, but some it stayed caught in the breeze. It twisted like a ribbon and moved into a clearing as they drove by. For some reason Rika couldn't seem to take her eyes off it and she watched it grow. It was picking up more snow from the ground and was twinkling like diamonds in the dying sunlight. Rika squinted and leaned closer to her window. Was it just her or was the squall starting to swirl into a shape?

It had four long legs, which thumped silently in the snow as it ran. It tossed its ghostly head and whinnied silently. Its mane and tail made of wind and snow flowed in wisps after it as it charged. Rika was entranced. She felt as though time itself was moving slower as the snow horse ran across the clearing. It then came to a stop and to her surprise it stared right at her, its vaporous body still swirling. They were driving past it now and Rika struggled to keep the horse in view.

"What are you looking at?"

It was getting hard to see the clearing now. Rika looked at her brother in surprise, "You mean you didn't see it?"

"See what?" he said with a hint of frustration.

"The horse in the clearing back there!"

Rodney turned around and looked. "I don't see anything."

He was right, the snow horse was gone now.

"Come you two get back in your seats. Now what is all this about a horse?"

"There was this snow squall blowing across the field," explained Rika excitedly, "That turned into a horse!" Rodney began to laugh.

Their mother had to pause a minute before answering. "What nonsense Honey, it was probably just a deer." Rika knew what she saw and it was no deer. "It's been a long drive, we're probably all a little stir crazy." She wasn't crazy. "Oh look there's her house, I knew we were almost there."

Aunt Shelley's house was an old log A-frame with a classic looking wood pile near by. There were also strange lumps in the snow where unknown objects were buried. It was definitely her house, because her rusty old Dodge truck was parked in front.

The family hopped out of the car and Aunt Shelley came out to meet them. She had on a paint-covered apron underneath her jacket and she was a very lean woman. Her hair was brown with tiny wisps of gray beginning to surface. It was frizzy and likely tied into a braid in order to keep it under control.

"Hello there everybody, glad to see you all made it here in one piece." She laughed.

"Hello Shelley, thanks so much for watching the kids for us on such short notice, Pete and I really appreciate it." answered their mother.

"No trouble at all Paula. I hardly ever get a chance to see the kids after all."

Rodney was stomping at the crunchy potato chip ice in the driveway, which forms when the water underneath it evaporates. Rika was standing next to her mother, but her gaze was fixed on the forest around them.

"Rodney stop goofing around and come greet your aunt!"

While their mother reprimanded Rodney, Aunt Shelley turned her attention to Rika. Her face had a strange, but gentle gleam to it as she stared at her.

"What's the matter Rika, you seem troubled by something?"

Rika blushed with embarrassment, "Oh uh it's nothing, I'm sorry."

A subtle smile crept onto Aunt Shelley's face, as Rodney came over and readied himself for the kiss on the cheek that was sure to come.

Their mother glanced at her wrist watch, "Oh my it's that late already! I'm sorry to have to just run like this, but I've got to get going."

"Don't worry about a thing Paula we'll be fine, you just worry about catching your flight."

"Thanks so much Shelley. Now you kids be good alright? I'll miss you, see you in a few days." With a few quick good byes their mother hopped into the SUV and just like that they were alone.

Aunt Shelley turned and looked at the kids with a pleasant smile. "Well now, let's get inside before Jack Frost nips your toes off." She opened the chipping wood door and Rodney slipped in as soon as there was enough room for him to squeeze through. It was very cluttered inside and even after Aunt Shelley flipped on the lights it was still very dim. It inspired Rika's curiosity and she quickly yanked off her boots and began to explore.

"Make yourselves at home." announced Aunt Shelley as she hung up their coats in the closet. The door was warped and it scrapped the hard wood floor as it closed.

"Hey Aunt Shelley do you have a T.V.?" asked Rodney.

"I think I do...I mean I haven't used it in a while, it should be in the living room."

The kitchen and the living room were connected by a high ceiling that showcased the A-frame's design. Rika could see the second floor from below, but it was too dark to tell what was up there. That wasn't a problem though, there was plenty to see down here anyway. There were all sorts of strange things scattered about, tiny sea shells and beach glass sitting on the window sills, an odd looking tribal mask leaning against a cluttered book case, to name just a few.

There were oil paintings on the walls too.

"Ugh it's all just static." moaned Rodney.

There was one of a million sunflowers that rolled like an ocean into a horizon of a purple sky.

“Oh sorry Rodney, try moving those antennas around a bit.”

The one hanging by the window was of a lazy looking silver cat. He was basking in a garden like he hadn't a care in the world. Rika felt as though his yellow eyes were staring right through her.

“These things are weird, Aunt Shelley.”

“That's why I got it for so cheap,” laughed Aunt Shelley, “Let me give you a hand.”

These paintings were so unusual. A woman in strange clothes talking to a raven, a village of homes amongst misty tree tops, which were painted so masterfully that they seemed real despite all logic.

“There we go, it's a little rough, but it's better than nothing right?” Rodney sighed, slumped down onto the worn green couch, and readied himself for the next three days.

“Aunt Shelley did you paint these?” asked Rika.

“Yup sure did. What do you think of them?”

Rika had never really seen anything like them before and wasn't entirely sure of what to say. She was by no means an art critic, but they looked very well done and they had this strange appeal to them. “They're very nice...I've certainly never seen anything like them before.”

“Really?” She looked genuinely surprised and she rubbed her chin in contemplation, “interesting...”

Rika jumped with fright as something brushed past her leg.

“Oh, there you are Solo, I was wondering where you had gotten to.”

The sleek silver cat stared back at them for a moment then plodded off.

Rika couldn't believe it, it was the same yellow eyed cat she had seen in the painting.

“Such a prima Donna.” sighed Aunt Shelley, “That prince has such an attitude.”

“Prince?”

“It's a joke, because his mother's name was Queen.” she explained, “Though he certainly does act like royalty doesn't he?”

Rika watched Solo's tail disappear around the corner of the hall, like a hem of satin cape.

"Now that we're all settled, what would you kids like for dinner? Mind you I don't have anything too fancy."

Rodney turned around anxiously. "Do you have Mac 'n Cheese?" He had the direness of someone searching for the last trace of society.

"That I can do."

Rika sat on the window sill and gazed out. It was late and she knew she should probably be in bed. Rodney was already asleep in the nearby bed, and was out cold in a Mac 'n Cheese stupor, but Rika was still restless. She was still hoping to catch a glance of the snow horse again. Sadly the forest outside her second story window was dark and still, quite devoid of anything supernatural. Rika was about to give up and turn in, when she heard a skittering noise on the wood floor outside their room.

Tentatively, Rika crept toward the door and peered into the hall. Solo was crouching at the other end, his tail swishing back and forth as he stared intently underneath an old dusty cabinet.

"He must have a mouse under there." She said to herself.

Solo's ears flicked and he got up from his crouch with a stretch. He yawned a large toothy yawn and decided to head down stairs. Whatever it was that he was doing he had obviously gotten bored with it.

Figuring everything was over Rika started to close the door, but stopped to get a better look at what came peeking out from beneath the cabinet. It was the size of a mouse, and as plump as one too, but that was about where the similarities ended. The little creature was walking on two legs and had on a ragged shirt and a large stocking cap. From what she could make out in the darkness he was humanoid in appearance with large dark eyes and big ears, and brown messy hair puffing out from beneath his cap. He was also toting a tiny bulging sack, which he had to give a quick yank, in order to get through the tiny hole in the baseboard on the other side of the hall, which he all too soon disappeared into.

Rika dashed down the hall and stared into the hole.

"I thought I heard someone up here." Rika looked up to see that her Aunt was standing above her.

"Aunt Shelley just now-!" The words wouldn't come out, so she just pointed at the hole.

"Hmm?" she looked down at the hole. "Oh that cat. He must have been chasing brownies again. I'm sorry he woke you Rika. I've told him countless times not to do that," she added with a laugh.

Rika just stared up at her aunt with wide utterly perplexed eyes.

"Oh don't worry it'll be fine. Solo gives them a scare, but they're far too quick for him. You go ahead and get some sleep."

Rika nodded without a word and stumbled back to her bed. What was going on?

Rika didn't say much the next morning. She debated telling her brother about what she had seen, but she thought better of it. There was only one person in this house that Rika felt she could turn to for some answers now, so late that morning she knocked on her Aunt's studio door.

"Rika is that you? Come on in." answered Aunt Shelley and slowly Rika pushed open the door.

"Welcome to my studio, Rika, here pull up a stool."

Aunt Shelley's studio was as messy as the rest of her house with artist supplies all over the place. There were tightly rolled tubes of paint on the floor and old easels leaning against the walls. Canvasses were everywhere, some of which had become discolored while others bore unfinished sketches. Rika saw a stool behind one of them and she carefully moved it over to where her aunt was painting and sat down beside her.

"I'm working on this one right now. What do you think of it?"

Even though it was branded by unfinished areas of white, Rika could tell that it was a painting of an eagle that looked like it was made of stars. It was soaring through the night sky with majestic grace and Rika could only imagine what it would look like when it was finished.

"It's based on a constellation called Aquillia the eagle. It was out very clearly the other night and I just got inspired to do it." She explained.

"It's amazing," said Rika. "It's so illogical, but you draw it like you've seen the real thing."

"I have," she replied simply, "Well, in theory anyway."

Rika looked at her aunt with confusion.

"You see I believe one is only limited by the boundaries of his or her own imagination. If you really look there's nothing you can't see, even if it's only in your mind's eye."

"I saw something really strange on the way over here, and those brownies...?"

"Don't be concerned if no one believes you Rika. It's hard for people to see with an open mind nowadays. Of course that reality is much of the inspiration behind my paintings."

"Really?"

"I like to think of my paintings more as doorways rather than simply objects. They're escapes for people, even if only for a few seconds, I try to show them something new and maybe even take them some where they've never been."

Rika paused for a moment, until a smile slowly came across her face. "I understand Aunt Shelley," she answered and she hopped off the stool. "I'm going to go see if I can find 'Prince' Solo."

Aunt Shelley nodded. "You'll probably find him on his throne in the living room, you know the one near the coffee table?"

"Right."

On the car ride home their mother pressed them about how their time with Aunt Shelley had gone.

"It was pretty boring," said Rodney, "Did you get us any thing?"

"In a minute sweetie. Rika how'd things go for you?"

"It was...better than I expected," she answered.

"How so?"

Rika shrugged, "Oh you probably wouldn't believe me, so I'll just show you some day okay?"

Their mother cocked her head with confusion and Rika gazed out her passenger side window. The snow looked beautiful in the sunlight, like thousands of tiny diamonds just waiting to be swept away.



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